STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST WEEKLY

15¢ IN U.S.A.

APRIL 9, 1932

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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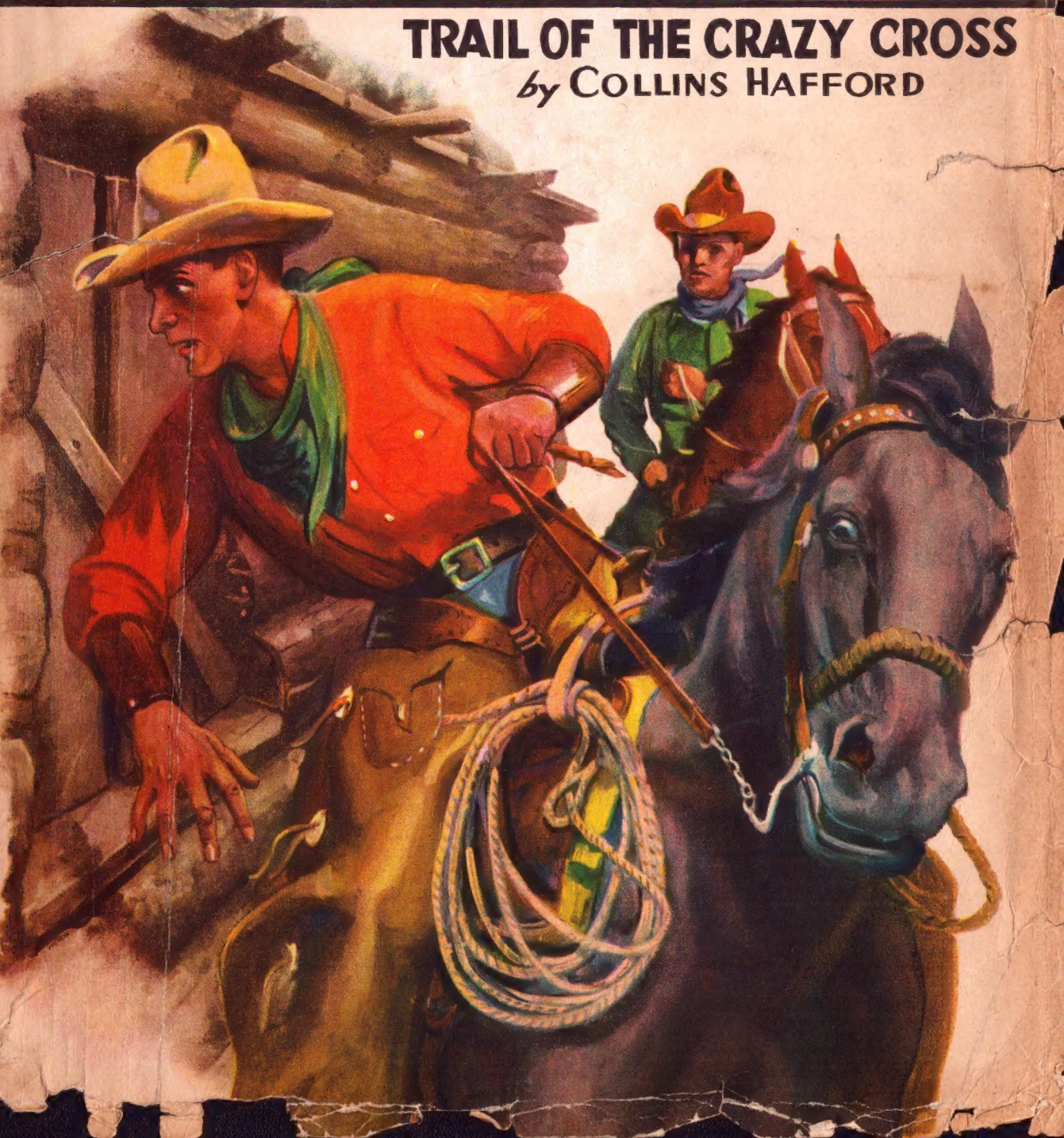
by COLLINS HAFFORD



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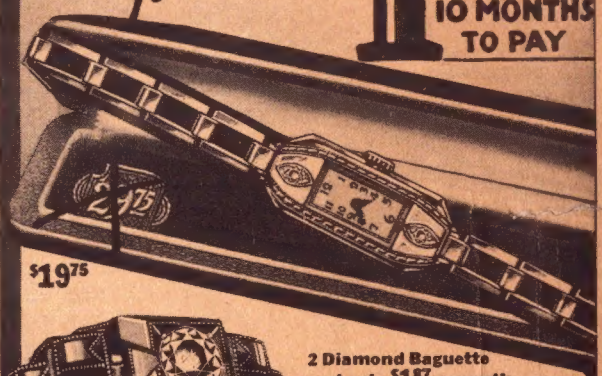

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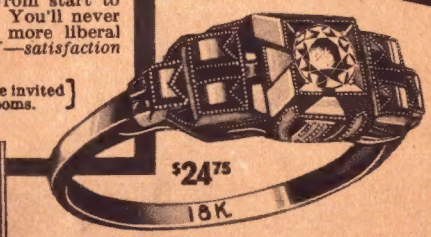

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GB2 . . . Strikingly new 18K Solid White Gold lady's mounting of exquisite design; delicately hand pierced and set with a specially selected brilliant genuine blue-white diamond. Offered for the first time at this low price. Only $24.75—$2.37 *a month.*

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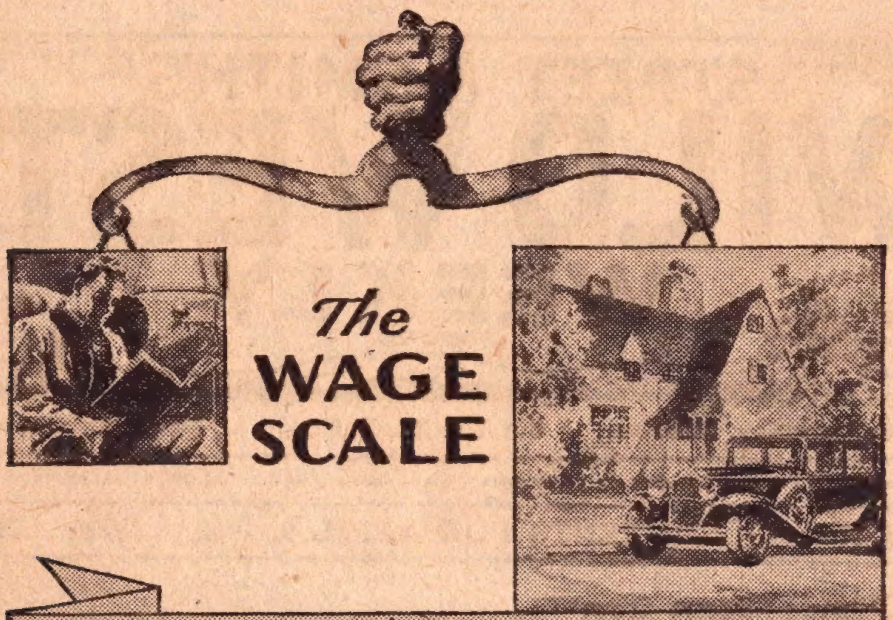

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Cover Picture—Scene from "Trail of the Crazy Cross" . . *F. Sprandling*

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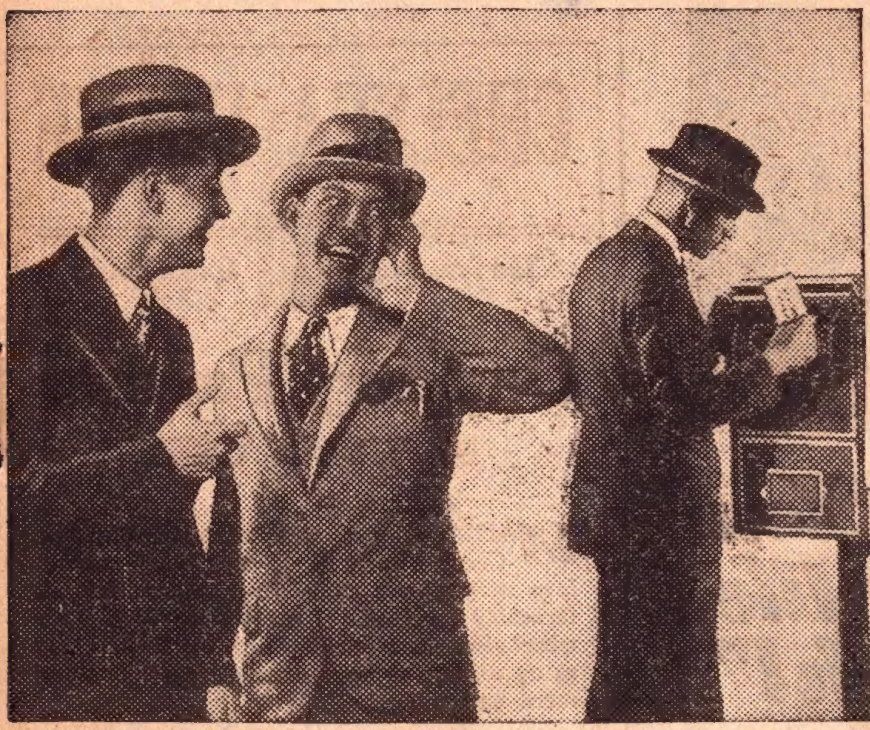

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"Won't it be grand!" he grinned. "Now he can quit punching time-clocks and eating 40-cent lunches." He raised his voice. "Drop me a postal sometime when you get out into big business and start making $10,000 a year, will you, Frank?"

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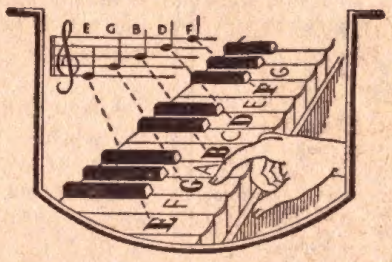

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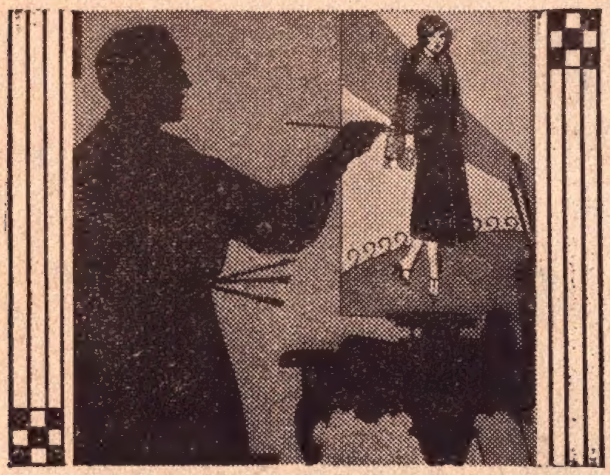

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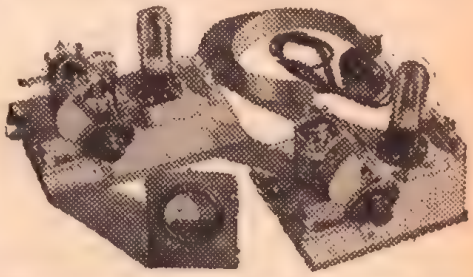

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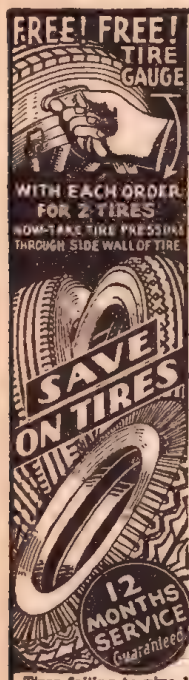
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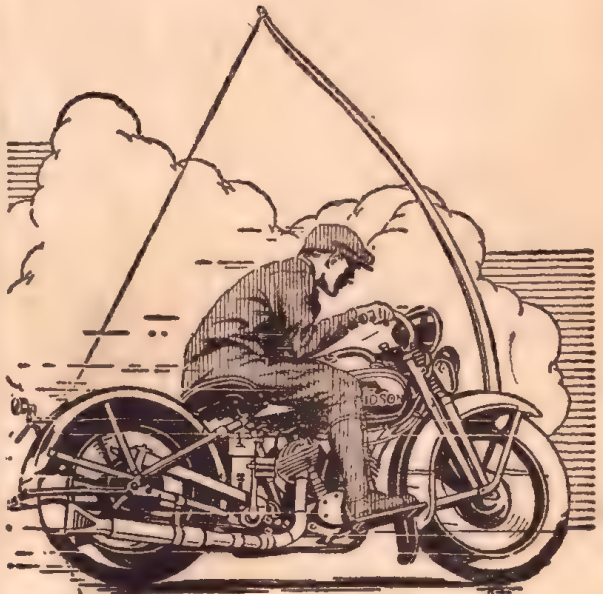

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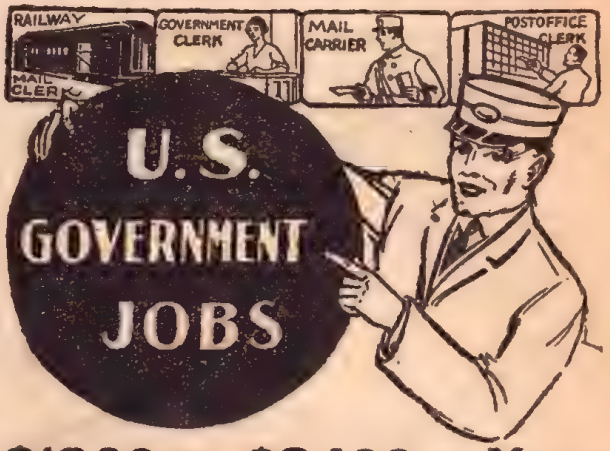

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Trail of the Crazy Cross

A "Lum Yates" Novelette

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CHAPTER I.

THE VALLEY RANCH.

THAT night, Lum Yates and Zeke Olroyd slept beneath the stars that seemed almost close enough to reach with their finger tips through the thin, high air. When they shucked from their blankets at dawn, there was a frosty feel, a tang of wine as they breathed deeply.

With the rising sun behind them, they faced the rugged country where broken ridges piled, wave upon wave, to the distant and higher peaks whose golden tips pricked the sky line.

This was new country to the two young Bar M punchers, much different and on a grander scale than the hills that surrounded Paradise Valley a hundred miles to the north. And Paradise Valley had been their idea of real mountainous country until now.

Five days before, they had set out from the Bar M on the trail of a remuda of fifty horses that had apparently strayed from the home spread. Straight west, with hardly

any turning to north or south, the trail had led.

Down on the flats, the tracks were plain and easy to follow. But for the last two days, the going was harder. If it had not been for a certain hunch of Lum's, the trail would have been lost. But always, when they kept straight to the west, they picked up the tracks again on the first stretch of damp earth.

Zeke had followed Lum's lead, unquestioningly. The gangly youth had unshakable faith in Lum's cunning and trail sense. Not a word of protest had Zeke offered, when the search stretched to five days, and the distance from the Bar M lengthened to more than a hundred miles.

But now, as the two young punchers stood beside the ashes of the previous night's camp fire, a bewildered look clouded Zeke's clear blue eyes. It was as if some unsettling idea had just flashed into his mind.

Slowly he turned and looked at Lum. A sharply expelled breath left his lungs with a hiss. His slender hands clenched into tight fists.

For Lum stood, straight and slender as a young spruce, his long legs wide apart, and his hands clasped behind him. His chin was high, and his mouth was set in a firm, straight line. His wide Stetson was pushed back from his smooth bronzed brow, revealing an unruly lock of dark hair.

But it was the glint of the unfathomable gray eyes that brought the breath hissing from Zeke's throat. These eyes, staring straight into the west from between slitted lids, told Zeke much.

"Mebbe—mebbe yo're thinkin' the same as me, Lum—thinkin' thet a bunch of stray hosses wouldn't keep to a straight line like these have."

Lum nodded slowly, his eyes still on the distant peaks. "I've knowed fo' three days thet this heah remuda wasn't strayin', Zeke. I've knowed by the trail they're leavin'—a trail made by bunched hosses travelin' at a good speed. But more'n eveh, I've knowed it by the three daid camp fiahs we've passed."

"Camp fires? I never seen none!" gasped Zeke. "Yuh never p'inted 'em out to me—an' I wasn't lookin' for none."

"Wasn't no use of gettin' yo' worried, Zeke. I knowed yo'd have to find out, sooneh or lateh. Theah was one daid fiah back not so far this side of the Cimarron. Anotheh jes' as we was gettin' inter the hills. An' the last back at thet crick we forded yesterday aftehnoon."

"Then yuh think thet——" Zeke left his sentence unfinished.

Lum nodded. "Them hosses are bein' driven by three-fo' men. They're proddin' 'em right lively. An' them men neveh bought thet remuda from ol' Sandy McClure. Jes' guessin' kind of offhand, thet'd make 'em rustlers."

"An' yo're figurin' on jumpin' 'em, Lum! I can tell it by yore eyes. It's thet Missouri stubbornness in yuh!"

A hint of a smile flicked across Lum's face. "We could have rode back to the Bar M an' got some of the boys, Zeke. But more'n likely we'd have lost the trail. Hard enough to foller, as it is."

"But we don't know this country, Lum. Don't have no idea who we're buckin' up against. There ain't no fifty head of hosses, even if they are the best of the Bar M remuda, thet're worth gettin' ourselves plugged for."

Lum faced Zeke. His face was grim, and a frown, as of anger, furrowed his brow. But far down in his eyes was a twinkle that didn't match his expression.

"All right, feller. We'll turn back. I had it figured aout thet yo' kind o' believed I wouldn't lead yo' inter a flock of hot lead. Kind o' thought thet yo' an' me could tackle mos' any outfit of hoss thieves. But I guess I was——"

"Blast yuh, Lum! If I didn't know yuh was a-foolin', yuh an' me would have it out right now. Yuh know blame well I'll foller yuh clear to the end!"

The grin that had been struggling behind Lum's masked expression broke through.

"I know, Zeke! I was jes' playin' hoss with yo'. Of course, yo'll trail along. But we ain't goin' to mix with 'em. We'll jes' root aout their hideout, then go fo' he'p."

A wide smile that held much of relief split Zeke's boyish face. The trace of anger was gone, and in its place was an excited, eager look.

"This here trip has turned out to be somethin' more than a sight-seein' expedition, after all, I guess," he breathed.

"By jing! I believe yo're beginnin' to relish excitement and dangeh," said Lum softly.

"Excitement, yes. But there ain't so much danger, with yuh ramroddin'," agreed Zeke.

"Fo'get the compliments, Zeke. We'd betteh be on ouah way. An' from heah, we're ridin' right careful, with ouah eyes open at every step. We don't know when we might be rammin' inter them rustler hombres."

But for the whole of the long morning, the two young punchers followed the westward trail without a glimpse of a living being. Speed was out of the question, for the lungs of the plains-bred animals rasped like leaky bellows from the high, thin air.

It seemed that now the vast hills determined to impede their progress at every step. The hills were steeper and more thickly boulder-strewn. Deep slashes cut their path, and impassable ridges confronted them.

But always the dim trail of the horses pointed the way. Three miles of the toughest kind of going were necessary to make a single mile of actual progress.

Then, when the sun was straight above, they topped the crest of a ridge that stretched endlessly from north to south. Lum, who was leading the way, pulled Snake, his blue outlaw horse, to an abrupt stop, as his wide blue eyes swept the valley beyond.

His upraised hand motioned Zeke to a halt behind him. With the swift grace of a panther, Lum slipped from his saddle. Zeke's mouth dropped open in startled amazement.

"Get off yore hoss, Zeke!" he snapped. "Get off, an' come heah!"

Zeke obeyed swiftly. Together, the two punchers stood with eyes barely above the saddle on Snake's back, and looked at the scene below.

Zeke was the first to speak: "Yuh —yuh reckon thet's the rustlers' spread?"

For a full minute, Lum stared down at the squat log cabin that sprawled beside the stream down there a full mile on the floor of the valley. Even through the thin, clear air, the stream looked like nothing so much as a narrow silver ribbon. And the house was as small as a child's plaything.

"It's a long ways off to tell, Zeke. Cain't see nothin' movin' daown theah. Ain't no smoke from the chimney, as far as I can tell. But thet don't mean nothin'. There might be a dozen killehs holed up theah. We got to get closer."

"Yo're leadin' the way, Lum!" Zeke's voice was unfaltering.

CHAPTER II.

GIRL OF THE CABIN.

THE dim trail of the horses they had been following seemed to lead straight down the steep slope toward the cabin. Everything—except one single half realized point—seemed to mark this as the hideout of the rustlers.

"We'll foller the top of the ridge, Zeke. Oveh to the east about a half mile, yo' can see a streak wheah the trees are a heap thicker. Wouldn't be none surprised if there was a little stream runnin' daown theah to jine thet crick somewheah beyond the cabin. We can sneak right daown through the trees, an' mebbe get right close."

They edged back down the slope about fifty yards. Then they reined to the left and followed the face of the hill. For a full half mile, they wormed their way through the thick brush and scrub trees.

A frown furrowed Lum's brow as he rode. There was something about that cabin—something that seemed to disagree with the idea that it was the hang-out of the rustlers. His keen brain wrestled with the problem.

But it was not until they pulled to a halt that it came to him. He turned in his saddle and faced Zeke.

"Thet theah log cabin, Zeke—I'm more than half minded thet it ain't wheah the rustlers is holin' up, afteh all. Eitheh thet, or they got the whole coutnry scared of 'em."

"Huh? Yo're thinkin'——"

"If we can sneak up on it, what's to keep othehs from doin' the same? Thet cabin ain't noways protected like it should be, ifn outlaws was usin' it fer their headquarters."

Zeke's eyes opened wide. Then a grin broke across his face.

"By jing! Thet's right, Lum! Reckon mebbe some prospector or settler lives there. Mebbe he'll know somethin' about the rustlers; mebbe he seen 'em pass with our hosses!"

Zeke touched Lightnin', his runty sorrel, with the rowels, as if he would head right down to the cabin. But Lum's sharp word halted him.

"Don't act plumb foolish, buddy! Remembeh, I'm jes' guessin'—an' guessin' is dangerous business, if yuh believe everything yo' guess is true. We'll scout thet cabin jes' like we knowed theah was rustlers hived up in it."

Now, with redoubled caution, they turned their horses toward the crest of the ridge about fifty yards above them. Just below the jagged ridge, Lum slipped from his horse and stole to the crest. Cautiously, slowly, he thrust his head above the line of rock. For a long minute, he examined the slope below.

It was as he had surmised. A twisting, torrent-worn slash led angling down across the slope, winding up about two hundred yards below the cabin. In the spring, this slash would be filled by a rushing stream of muddy water. But now it was dry.

Trees grew much larger and thicker on the edge of the slash, probably because of more water and richer soil from the wash of the stream.

But his keen eyes could not catch a single movement that spoke of a living being down the length of the slash or beside the cabin. It appeared that he and Zeke were the only humans in this whole vast stretch of tumbled hills.

He turned and motioned to Zeke. The gangly young puncher came forward, leading Snake. Lum swung into the saddle.

"Don't seem to be nobody to home, Zeke. But we ain't takin' no

chances. We'll haid fo' the cabin, but we'll keep ouah eyes open like we was expectin' to be bushwhacked at every step."

The floor of the steep slash was boulder-strewn and deeply pocketed by the torrents that swept it in freshet time. There was no trail to follow. They had to pick their way by their own wits.

But it had one advantage. So twisting was the ravine, so filled with great rocks, that cover was the most plentiful thing they had. Only for scant seconds at a time, were they in the clear.

After a half hour's going that taxed the sure-footedness of their horses and their own ability as riders, they came out upon the fairly flat stretch that led to the swirling stream a hundred yards away.

Here they pulled to a halt once more.

"Yo' stay an' watch the hosses, Zeke. I'll scout the cabin afoot. Keep to the coveh of thet big boulder—an' don't make a sound, unless yo' heah me callin'."

Before Zeke could argue, Lum slipped from his saddle and disappeared into the jumble of rocks to the right. Three seconds, and he was swallowed up by the thick juniper brush and the tall trees that topped the tangle.

With the skill and caution of a forest Indian, he stalked the squat log cabin. For a hundred yards, he made his way by his sense of direction. Then, through an opening in the tangle, he caught his first close-up glimpse of the structure.

For a moment, he halted, and from around the trunk of a thick-bodied tree, he looked it over with eyes that did not miss a detail. Slowly he shook his head.

The cabin seemed to be deserted. No smoke came from the crude chimney. The windows were shuttered and barred. There was no sound or movement to tell of occupancy.

"Reckon whoeveh lived theah has high-tailed it," he muttered beneath his breath. "Jes' anotheh deserted ran——"

Then he caught his breath sharply. For his eyes had strayed to the tiny corral fifty yards down the bank of the stream from the cabin.

It was a crude affair, made of rough-barked cedar poles inexpertly put together. Its north side was the wall of a low shed, just as crudely made. It was the kind of affair that an inexperienced settler would make.

It was not the corral or the little shed that had startled the slim puncher. At first, he was not sure just what it was that caught his eye.

But as he watched through narrowed lids, a horse pushed its nose out into the open from the door of the shed. Lum waited tensely. Where there is a horse corralled, there should be its owner somewhere near.

For a long five minutes, Lum crouched beside the tree, his eyes glued upon the shed. But no further movement came. The horse did not emerge from the little building.

At last Lum rose silently to his feet. With redoubled caution, he zigzagged toward the shed. Taking advantage of every thick bush, every jagged rock for cover, he drew up behind the squat structure.

The cracks were wide in the slab wall, and he peered into the gloomy interior. For a moment, he could make out nothing. Then his eyes became accustomed to the half darkness.

There was nothing to obstruct his view. Just a low manger at one side—nothing that could hide a man,

if there had been a man to hide. But the tired-appearing horse with its head thrust out above the half door was the only living thing he could see.

"It ain't hardly human," muttered Lum. "But it sho' looks like whoeveh lives heah high-tailed it, leavin' thet hoss to die of thirst."

Then a slow, sheepish smile split his face. "By jing! Jes' because we're on the trail of rustlers, everything looks mysterious. Of co'se, these heah folks have gone to town, or on a visit. They ain't gone fo' good."

He straightened and strode out into the clearing behind the shed. Then he turned toward the slash in the hills and beckoned with his swinging hat.

In a few minutes, Zeke appeared, leading Lum's mount behind his own. As he pulled up beside Lum, the slim Bar M puncher swung into the saddle. In terse words, he explained his conclusions to Zeke.

"The folks thet live heah are gone off somewheah—eitheh hidin' out from the rustlers, or off on a visit. Leastways, there ain't nobody in sight, an' the house 'pears plumb deserted."

"Then this ain't the rustlers' hideout, after all!" There was a queer mixture of disappointment and relief in Zeke's voice.

"Nope, we ain't reached the end of the trail yet. An' we betteh be movin' along. We'll give ouah hosses a drink down to the crick. Fill ouah own canteens, too."

They swung their animals and headed toward the house. A bit beyond, they should pick up the trail of the stolen horses once more. And where this trail crossed the stream, they would stop for water.

Lum, a few yards in the lead, rounded the corner of the house. His eyes swept it. The shutter on the front window was warped from the dry weather, leaving finger-wide cracks.

On an impulse, he reined Snake right up against the wall and pulled to a halt. He leaned over and placed his eye to the crack. Then he jerked erect, startled.

For he had looked squarely into a white, wide-eyed face! It was only a split-second glance, but long enough to see beyond a shadow of doubt that it was the face of a girl. The fleeting gaze had fixed in his mind the tumbled mass of golden-brown hair, the long lashes, the delicate mouth, and the wide blue eyes.

Zeke, close behind, caught the half-smothered exclamation that came from Lum's lips. He pulled Lightnin' to a halt, a startled look on his face.

"Lum! What is it? What did yuh——"

Lum thrust out his hand to halt the stream of words. Then he touched his lips with a forefinger.

"Theah's a woman in theah, Zeke!" he whispered. "A woman thet's scared mighty nigh to death!" He leaned forward again as if for another look, but drew back and shook his head.

"I—don't know—what to——"

But the decision was taken from his hands. The door swung open, and the barrel of a rifle was thrust through. The muzzle, trembling more than a little, still covered the two Bar M punchers.

The same wide blue eyes looked across the sights—the same mass of tumbled golden-brown hair above; the same tense, frightened mouth.

"Put up your hands! Put them high, or I'll—I'll shoot!" There was desperation in the voice that spoke, but even that did not hide the musical sound of it.

Both young punchers thrust their hands skyward, without a word of argument. Lum would have obeyed, even if there had been no gun to back up the command. And quite likely Zeke felt the same way.

CHAPTER III.

THE PECOS KID'S MESSAGE.

"GO away from here! I tell you, he's not here! Why don't you leave me alone?"

Lum could see that the slender, golden-haired girl was near a break. Her lips trembled, and there was a wild, frightened look in the blue eyes.

"We—we didn't mean fo' to scare yo', miss. We neveh harmed a woman in all ouah born days. We don't know jes' what yo're a-meanin', but we'll go. Sho', we'll go!"

"You know right well what I mean! Your gang was here yesterday. They searched the place, and now they have sent you back to spy on me!"

Lum's brows drew down in a frown. "Ouah gang? What makes yo' say thet, miss?"

"I know the brand on your horses. It's the same brand the herd they were driving carried—the same brand as that on the big bay that your evil leader rode."

Lum looked at Zeke, wide-eyed. Zeke returned the stare. Then Lum turned once more to the girl.

"Reckon thet's the same outfit we're huntin', miss! Yo' see, Zeke an' me are from the Bar M, way back in the flat country. An' we're chasin' an outfit thet rustled ouah remuda." Then his brows drew down in a frown. "But what was thet yo' was sayin' abaout somebody not bein' heah—about the gang searchin' the place?"

"You're not—not lying to me? You're not really part of that gang?" There was a pathetic, appealing note in the slender girl's voice; but she still covered the two Bar M punchers with the rifle.

"We've done lots of things, miss, but lyin' ain't one of ouah habits."

Now the long rifle barrel slowly dropped. The girl leaned against the door for support. It was plain that the reaction from the tense desperation had left her momentarily weak.

"Get down and come inside. I'm —I'm still afraid out here."

Lum and Zeke swung from their saddles and ground-tied their animals. They followed the slender girl into the cabin. Their eyes swept the darkened interior swiftly. Apparently the girl was the only occupant.

Then Lum surveyed the long, low room more slowly. He noted the bright chintz curtains, colorful in spite of the fact that the shutters kept out the bright light of day.

His heart skipped a beat as he noted the spotless cleanliness of the crude cabin, the dainty touches here and there that spoke of a feminine hand.

"Yo'—yo' don't live heah all alone, do yo', miss?" he asked softly.

"My brother and I—but he's been gone three days. Took the buckboard and the team up to the railroad for supplies. He'll not be back for three days more, and maybe that will be too late."

"Too late? Too late fo' what, miss?"

"That gang of killers!" A shudder shook the slender form as she spoke.

"Yo' still haven't tol' us abaout thet gang," reminded Lum soothingly.

"I've seen them before. They have ridden past here several times,

but never when I was alone. And they have never molested us, until yesterday. Even then, they rode past, driving the herd before them. I thought I was safe once more, until that wounded boy rode out of the hills."

Lum shook his head in bewilderment. "Yore words is gettin' mo' an' mo' puzzlin', miss."

"They had been out of sight for a half hour or more. I was out in the yard again, when the staggering horse burst out of the trees." The girl was plainly trying to hold herself in check—trying to tell her story clearly.

"I could see that the slim man who rode was wounded: He grasped the saddle horn to hold himself on. And even then, he swayed until I feared he would fall.

"The horse pulled up in front of the cabin and stopped of its own accord. The rider—a half-breed, and only a boy—held on desperately.

"His eyes were wild and frightened, and his face was twisted with pain. I ran to him, and made to help him from his saddle. But he would not dismount.

"He talked half wildly about the Crazy Cross outfit that was following him. He spoke of another man who was in desperate danger. He declared that the gang was only a little way behind him, and that they would kill him before he could carry his message."

"Crazy Cross outfit?" Lum shook his head. "Neveh heerd of it. But what did yo' do, miss?"

"I remembered a hiding place—a little ravine leading from the stream up into the hills. Its opening is no more than a hundred yards upstream. I led his horse to the ravine."

"Then the Crazy Cross outfit didn't find him?" queried Lum softly.

The golden-haired girl shook her head. "I hid him safely. I returned to the cabin for food for him. I had no more than reached here, when the same men I had seen an hour before rode up.

"They asked me about a wounded rider, and I told them truthfully that he was not here. They would not believe, and searched the cabin and the horse shed.

"When they found no one, they swore I was concealing him. At last they rode off to the north, threatening that if they did not find the boy, they would return."

"An' in spite of thet, yo' was stickin' heah? I ain't plumb sho' whetheh thet's foolishness—or real man-sized nerve." There was more than a hint of admiration in Lum's voice.

"But I *had* to stay! They might have burned the cabin and the sheds. They might have destroyed all the work of two years. It would have broken Fred's heart to lose these possessions."

"Reckon it'd hurt him worse to lose his sisteh," grunted Lum. Then he looked squarely into her eyes. "Yo' ain't agoin' to stay heah no longeh, Miss——"

"Romney—Virginia Romney. I—I didn't——"

"Yo' got to leave heah, Miss Romney!" broke in Lum. Then a frown furrowed his brow. "If thet ravine is a good hidin' place, thet's wheah we'll take yo'."

"But the cabin!"

"Yo' couldn't protect it against a gang of men. Yo' ain't tol' us how many was in thet outfit, miss."

"Only four yesterday, but I have seen as many as ten before."

"Four's enough to wipe yo' out an' burn the cabin. Yo're goin' to

hide out. Ain't no time to lose. Snake'll carry double, an' yo' can point the way to us."

Apparently the slender girl had yielded the responsibility to Lum without a question. For she followed him outside, and he lifted her to the saddle. Then he clambered up behind her.

Zeke had ventured hardly a word in the cabin. For he, as well as the girl, was willing to obey Lum's orders in silence.

"Straight down to the creek," directed the girl. "Turn right at the bank. Follow it around the first bend."

The brush was thick and the going almost impossibly rough. But the two young punchers urged their horses into it. Sometimes right at the very edge of the rushing stream —again fully fifty yards from it— they headed to the north.

Now they swept around the bend. But they were right upon the narrow ravine, before they saw the slitted opening. Hardly ten feet wide, it was brush-choked and boulder-strewn.

Lum pulled on the reins to halt Snake, but the girl urged him ahead.

"You can get through, even if it doesn't look like it. There, between those two big boulders. There's just enough room."

Doubtful, but willing to try, Lum urged Snake ahead. Sure enough, the reluctant horse at last pushed through the brush. Just a few yards inside the opening, the ravine widened slightly, and the tangle of brush thinned.

"Around the first bend!" urged the golden-haired girl.

They continued for another fifty yards, and here the ravine angled sharply to the left. And around the outjutting shoulder of rock, Lum pulled to a swift halt. For there, beneath an overhanging shelf of rock, lay a slender, boyish form on a double thickness of blankets.

Virginia Romney slipped from the saddle, and Lum dropped down beside her. Zeke drew Lightnin' to a stop, swung to the rocky floor of the ravine and hastened to them.

As Lum stood above the dark-skinned figure, bright black eyes stared up at him. There was fear in their depths—fear, but a great resolve. The white teeth clenched tightly, as if to say that nothing could pry information from between them.

"These are not enemies, Roberto," said the girl softly, as she knelt beside the blanket. "They have come to help us."

"Perhaps they try to make fooling us, señorita! No believing them! Maybee they seek the life of the Pecos Keed! I'm no talking until I see heem who the Pecos Keed say to deliver message to!"

Lum jerked erect at these words. A startled look swept over his face. The "Pecos Kid"! The Pecos Kid in danger!

His mind pictured the dark face of the man who called himself the "Pecos Kid." His memory went back to the many times he had worked with the mysterious man.

The Pecos Kid was in reality a deputy United States marshal, who performed his duties in the guise of an outlaw. The Pecos Kid was a famous name among the lawless, just as it was among those who knew his real character.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HILLS OF DANGER.

"THE Pecos Kid?" The three words burst from Lum's lips. "You come from the Pecos Kid—and he's in dangeh?"

"Me, I'm no talk!" answered the wounded boy on the blankets.

"But I'm a friend of the Pecos Kid! You say you are carrying a message to some one. Is the message—is it directed to Lum Yates, at the Bar M?" The last words were spoken hesitantly, as if an idea had just come to the slim puncher.

The half-breed boy's eyes opened wide. There was a desperate, questioning look in them. He looked from Lum to the girl, then back at Lum.

"Deed—deed I talk when I no have my senses?"

Lum shook his head. "Yo' neveh give nothin' away, son. But I'm Lum Yates—an' the Pecos Kid is one of my best friends. Many times he has helped me—an' many times I have helped him."

"Ees it true, meester? Are you make fooling of me?" There was desperate pleading in the boy's voice.

"It's true, Roberto! He told me his name before he knew of you." Virginia Romney spoke softly. And apparently the half-breed boy wanted to believe.

"Then I can tell you, Meester Lum Yates! For the Pecos Keed, he say to ride to the Bar M. He say to tell Lum Yates that he wounded, but that he well hidden an' have food for week. He say for Lum Yates, weeth five-seex men, to follow Roberto to hees hiding place for to rescue heem. He say eet is dangerous, for Crazy Cross men watch for to keel. But to trus' Roberto—that Roberto know the way."

Lum whirled to Zeke. "Yo' heah thet, Zeke? The Pecos Kid is needin' us! An' we're hangin' around heah like we didn't have a care in the world!"

"Yo're forgettin', Lum, thet if we hadn't come here, we wouldn't have knowed nothin' about the Pecos Kid. Reckon we owe Miss Romney—an' Roberto, here—aplenty."

Lum dropped his head, and there was an apologetic tone in his voice as he addressed the slender girl:

"I beg yore pahdon, Miss——"

"My friends call me Virginia," said the girl softly.

A flush of color stole across Lum's face. "I'm sorry I seemed to fo'get, Miss—Virginia. But, yo' see, the Pecos Kid an' me——"

"I know, Lum. He's your friend, and he needs you. But what can you two do alone?"

And now the half-breed boy spoke from the blankets: "The Crazy Cross outfeet number twelve, weeth Burke Cross as their leader. They keelers! They shoot the Pecos Keed. Almos' keel heem—an' heem the bes' tracker an' surest shot in the hills!"

"But he's needin' help, an' I cain't go back on him!" Lum's words were slow and even.

Zeke opened his mouth to protest. Then he saw the far-away look in Lum's eyes—noted the thin mouth and the chin held high. His own mouth closed without uttering a word.

The half-breed boy started to speak, but Zeke silenced him with a shake of his head. For a full five minutes, no sound broke the quiet of the hidden ravine.

Then Lum spoke slowly. "Yo'll ride to the Bar M fo' help, Zeke." He looked down at the wounded boy. "An' yo' betteh see if yo' cain't get Doc Winters to come along to tend to Roberto. Virginia will stay heah with him. Me, I'll go to the Pecos Kid!"

"But Roberto says the Crazy Cross outfit numbers twelve, Lum. What can yuh do against them?" Zeke's voice was pleading.

"I'll have to trust to luck to slip

past 'em, Zeke. Reckon they won't be lookin' fo' a single rideh. Roberto says the Pecos Kid is safe, so if I reach him, I'll be safe, too, until yo' come with the Bar M outfit. Then we can take 'em from both sides."

Zeke nodded reluctant agreement. "The Bar M hosses can wait until we're through, Lum!"

"Reckon we'll find them hosses at the Crazy Cross spread, son! We won't be givin' up ouah errand, when we go to help the Pecos Kid!"

"By jing, yo're right! It was the Crazy Cross outfit thet was after Roberto—which was the same passel of skunks thet rustled our remuda."

But now the half-breed boy spoke hesitantly. "Me, I'm too bad afraid Señor Lum cannot fin' the Pecos Kid! He too well hidden! Eet is hard to fin', for eet is only a little cave in the hills!"

"They ain't no better trailer on the range than Lum," broke in Zeke. "Jest give him a couple of landmarks, an' he can find a pebble in the desert!"

The half-breed boy swept his gaze to Zeke, then back to Lum. Doubt was plain to read in his black eyes. But no other plan was possible. He nodded his head in agreement.

In swift words, lapsing often into Spanish, he gave Lum a word picture of the trail he must follow. And on the rocky ground he traced out a crude map.

Lum's brow furrowed with thought, and his lips moved as if following the half-breed's words. When Roberto was finished, Lum nodded.

"Reckon I can make it from thet!" he said tersely.

Zeke drew a long breath. Then he thrust out his slender hand to Lum. "Yuh'll be careful, won't yuh, Lum? I'll be worryin' about yuh!"

"I'll be ridin' with eyes wide, son! An' don't take no chances yo'self!"

Now Zeke swung into his saddle and headed Lightnin' back along the way he had come. "Good-by, all of yuh! I'll make smokin' tracks, an' be back mighty soon with help!"

But Virginia Romney's swift words halted him. "There's a way out of here that doesn't go back that way, Zeke. It's rough going, but you can make it. Just follow this ravine to its source. From there is a dim path that meets your trail over beyond the ridge!"

The three there in the ravine watched Zeke, until he disappeared in the tangle that choked the twisting ravine. But neither they nor Zeke were aware of the glittering pair of eyes that saw the gangly rider come out onto the back trail, a half hour later.

Instead, by that time Lum was a full mile from the hidden ravine and well on the trail the half-breed boy had mapped out.

Until he put that mile behind him, Lum rode with eyes unceasingly on the brush and rocks about him. Well he knew that here would be his most dangerous minutes until he reached the vicinity of the Crazy Cross spread.

But not a movement or a sound except the click of his own horse's hoofs came to the alert waddy. Then he drew up in the purple shadow of a great boulder and scanned the jagged ridges and towering peaks ahead of him.

A thin smile flicked across his face. "Theah she is, Snake! An' thet half-breed hombre sho' described it! Looks fo' all the world like a saddle on a black stallion!"

His gaze was fixed on a twin peak that stood aloof from its fellows. Its vast slopes and the dip of the ridge between did resemble greatly a rough-hewn saddle. And the lower ridges at either end might, by the

help of a lively imagination, look like the back of a black horse.

The peak might be twenty miles away or only ten. Distances were deceiving, here in the high country. Roberto had guessed it at fifteen, and that was probably about correct.

The half-breed boy had given no definite path to reach this peak. His only warning was to stay clear of the trail the rustlers had taken.

But Lum's trail sense told him that the ridges would be dangerous, as well; that he must keep to the valleys, the canyons, the thickly wooded slopes.

If he thought he had traveled rought country before, this stretch ahead of him was a nightmare. Only sheer desperation kept him going.

Over almost impassable slopes, the gallant blue outlaw horse clambered. Down steep, boulder-choked ravines; along the rim of a canyon whose sheer wall dropped a full two hundred feet; through twisting slashes that seemed to have no beginning or end.

But always he kept below the sky line, and always he headed toward the saddle mountain. It seemed to the desperate young rider that he was making no headway at all. He watched the sun drop slowly down the western horizon, and urged Snake to a still faster pace.

But there was still an hour of daylight when he emerged from a dense stretch of scrub spruce and tangled juniper, and found himself at the very foot of the steep slope of the saddle peak.

From this point, cover would be scarce until he entered the defile that led to the Pecos Kid's hiding place. Sheltered by a house-sized boulder, Lum scanned the vast slope before him—examined the foot of the slope from north to south.

If there was a watcher, he was well hidden, for no hint of human presence came to Lum. He drew a deep breath of relief. He urged Snake out to the edge of the slope, and turned to parallel it to the right.

CHAPTER V.

INTO THE MOUNTAIN.

THERE, a quarter of a mile away, was the notch that marked the entrance to the narrow slash. Just that distance, and he would be fairly safe from the Crazy Cross outfit.

With teeth clenched tightly and eyes narrowed to mere slits, Lum leaned forward in his saddle. Hardly could he restrain himself from jamming the rowels into Snake's ribs, so desperately eager he was to reach the shelter of the narrow slash.

But the blue outlaw horse was making good time, considering the roughness of the path he must take. Lum turned in his saddle and swept a backward glance along the foot of the slope.

Half the distance was passed—and still no sign of pursuit. Lum drew a long breath of relief. It was beginning to look as if he had slipped past any watcher that might have been stationed near.

He pushed on another fifty yards. Lum shot another look back over his shoulder. Then he jerked erect, the breath hissing between his teeth.

For two riders had burst from the brush some quarter of a mile behind, and were roweling at top speed toward him. And that fleeting glance had told him that they were not friends.

The men's desperate speed—their tense eagerness that was plainly to be seen even at that distance, told Lum that they meant to ride him down—hoped to close up on him before he sensed their presence!

"We got to run fo' it now, Snake!" he muttered. "Get a move on, feller!" He touched the blue outlaw horse with his rowels.

As Snake leaped forward in a frenzied burst of speed, Lum Yates snatched the long squirrel rifle from its scabbard beneath the stirrup skirt. He swung in his saddle.

The pursuers had cut down the distance somewhat, but it was still too far for accurate shooting, even with his rifle. And he could see that the men were armed only with six-guns. There was little chance for them to harm him—yet.

"If I can jes' hold 'em at their distance until I reach thet slash!" he muttered.

He shifted the butt of his rifle to his shoulder and squinted along the sights. With Snake twisting and turning about the boulders, accurate aim was impossible.

That was just as well, though. For Lum did not want to shoot either of the men. Killing would be only the last resort—and then only if it was necessary to save his life or that of the Pecos Kid.

Now he squeezed the trigger.

Crack! The rifle barked out its sharp report!

Whee-e-e! Zing! The bullet sang between the riders and flattened out on a rock behind!

They pulled their horses to a slithering halt and slipped from their saddles to the shelter of a boulder. But Lum urged Snake ahead at a still faster pace.

Apparently surprised that Lum did not stop and follow up his advantage, the two men leaped from their cover and vaulted into their saddles again. But now the Bar M puncher had gained a hundred yards on them.

They were still a quarter of a mile behind when Lum rounded a shoulder of rock and found the narrow opening of the slash directly at his left.

He pulled Snake to a sliding stop and neck-reined into the defile. It was so narrow that the rocks on either side almost rubbed his legs. Like a great crack left by a mighty upheaval, it split the vast face of the slope.

Desperately he urged Snake up the steep floor of the slash. A bend, no more than fifty yards ahead, would hide him from the two hard-bitten riders who would soon come charging past the opening.

Perhaps if he reached it, they would pass without ever guessing that a rider had entered the knife-thin crack. The sound of the pursuing hoofs came clearly to the slim waddy. There was only a second or two left!

But Snake squirmed around the outjutting rock just as the riders below thundered past. Lum heaved a sigh of relief as he pulled the blue outlaw horse to a stop for a brief breathing spell.

For a moment, it had looked as if the secret of the Pecos Kid's hiding place had been discovered. But now that danger was past.

But was it? Once more the pound of hoofs came to him, and this time from the other direction. The grim killers were coming back. Their pace was slower, too, as if they were taking time to search for the spot where they had lost their prey.

"Time to get goin' again, Snake!" breathed Lum. "They won't pass up thet crack this time!"

Once more he urged the blue outlaw horse up the steep, narrow floor of the crack. A hundred yards of twisting, writhing, rocky trail, then he stopped for an instant!

His heart skipped a beat! The click of hoof on rock meant that

the men were on his trail. He might keep ahead, but what good would it do him? They would come at last to the end of the crack. And there it would mean bullets, with death as the portion of some one!

For a moment, he was minded to stop and have it out. The rustlers could come at him only one at a time. And he would have the advantage of height and surprise. But he shook his head. There should be some way out of this besides bullets! There always had been in every other desperate predicament in which he had found himself!

Once more he urged Snake ahead. If the worst came to the worst, he'd have to shoot. But there was still a full five hundred yards of this slash.

Now the crack twisted sharply to the right. Here a great rock overhung the defile—a rock that almost filled the crack ten feet above Lum's head. It looked as if at this spot some human hand had cut away the rubble from beneath the overhanging boulder.

Then Lum's eyes narrowed. That is just what had happened! There was the six-inch trunk of a spruce tree carefully set into the rock of the trail, its upper end braced tightly against the boulder!

Lum pulled Snake to a sudden halt, his eyes narrowing. In years gone by, some one had set this tree trunk here—perhaps braced the boulder before burrowing under it. That must mean that without the brace, that boulder would——

Swiftly Lum uncoiled the rope at his saddle horn. With flying fingers he tied the end of the rope about the log. Then he dallied the other end to his saddle horn.

"It's a mighty heavy pull, Snake! But yo' jes' *got* to make it!"

As if thoroughly understanding its master's words, the gallant blue horse leaped forward until the rope tightened. Belly to the ground, the horse heaved forward.

The rope was as tight as a piano wire. It fairly cracked with the strain. But the tree trunk did not budge!

"Pull, Snake! Hardeh! Hardeh!" Lum implored the gallant animal.

Once more the horse dug in, but still the log held fast!

And now the sound of pursuing hoofs came closer. Ten seconds more, just ten seconds and it would be too late! Lum hurtled from his saddle and grasped the rope in desperate hands!

He added his weight to that of the blue outlaw horse. Facing the down trail, he saw the first of the pursuing riders rounding the bend only fifty yards behind. He saw plainly the twisted, evil face! He saw a hand streak for a holster!

But now the tree trunk gave an inch! With strength of desperation, Lum heaved again. With a crash the log gave way. For an instant the boulder above did not budge.

Then slowly—slowly it slipped—an inch, two inches! Now, with a mighty crashing roar, it hurtled downward into the slash!

Above the sound of the hurtling rock arose the fear-filled scream of the rider below. The shriek seemed to tell that he saw what his fate would be, as the boulder hurtled its many tons of weight down through the narrow crack in the face of the mountain side.

Lum felt a wave of nausea as he sensed the meaning of the scream. He had not thought of the possibility of the boulder crushing the pursuing riders. He had only meant to plug up the slash.

Tense and breathless, he watched the great boulder crash to the ground. He saw it bounce a full

foot, in spite of its tremendous weight. He saw it turn half over as it slithered downward, gathering speed.

Twenty-five yards it hurtled toward the terror-stricken rustlers below. Then it struck an outjutting shoulder of rock, hesitated, then came to a stop. Lum drew a long breath of relief.

Swiftly he loosed his rope from about the tree trunk. And as he swung into his saddle, he coiled it and thonged it to the saddle horn.

"Get to goin', Snake! Reckon we're safe now!"

CHAPTER VI.

ZEKE FAILS.

ONCE more Lum urged Snake upward along the twisting, narrow slash. Relief was in his heart, for he had definitely stopped pursuit from behind. It did not occur to him—then—that he had also plugged up the way out of this crack in the mountain.

His only thoughts were of his good fortune. He would soon be beside the Pecos Kid. All there would be to it then would be to wait until Zeke brought the Bar M outfit. They—with Lum and the Pecos Kid as reserve forces—would make short work of the Crazy Cross gunmen.

But if he had been gifted with second sight—if he could have seen through space and watched Zeke ride up that ravine back by the Romney place, his thoughts would have been greatly different.

For a glittering pair of eyes had watched Zeke as he came cautiously out of the brush-choked ravine onto the ridge where he and Lum had obtained their first sight of the log cabin below.

A thick body crouched still closer to the ground behind the twisted trunk of an aspen, as Zeke swept the ridge with close-lidded gaze.

An evil, knife-scarred face writhed in an evil leer as Zeke, apparently assured that his way was clear, rode out to pick up the back trail.

The slim rider's path led directly past the aspen tree that hid the villainous skulker. Twice his gaze swept uneasily toward it as if some sixth sense warned him. But the thick-bodied man was skillfully concealed.

Now Zeke was beside the tree. Like an explosion, the thick brush burst asunder. A stubby-fingered hand streaked out and grasped the reins, snatching them from Zeke's hands.

Another hand held a long-barreled six-gun, trained square upon Zeke's middle. Zeke jerked erect, startled. Then his face went white.

"H'ist 'em, hombre! An' be blasted quick about it!" The voice was coarse and brutal.

Zeke's hands shot skyward. Resistance was out of the question. The scarred face was branded killer on every feature.

And now the burly man threw back his head. A loud guffaw came from his throat.

"Yuh thought yuh was plenty slick, huh? Thought yuh'd git clear, after all. But it takes a heap smoother hombre than yuh to get past Bull Waller!"

"I—I don't—know yuh! Ain't never—seen yuh before!" Plainly Zeke was fighting for time to understand this situation.

"Yuh seen me plenty, hombre! But yuh was goin' too fast to know me. Reckon yuh won't forget the chase yuh was leadin' yesterday, fer a long time."

"Chase? Yesterday? I don't ——" But Zeke did not finish the sentence.

His face would have told plainly to a more intelligent man that he did understand. This burly ruffian took him for the half-breed boy who had escaped the Crazy Cross men—was congratulating himself on capturing the Pecos Kid's messenger.

Once more Zeke opened his mouth to speak. Then he closed his teeth with a click. If he told the rustler that he had made a mistake, that would put Virginia Romney and Roberto in grave danger. Better keep mum—let "Bull" Waller believe what he wished.

"Yuh got me. What yuh goin' to do now?" asked Zeke evenly.

"Yuh'd ought to know the answer!" rasped the outlaw. "Yo're headin' fer the Crazy Cross with me! Reckon Burke Cross'll be plenty tickled to see yuh! He's honin' to know jest where the Pecos Kid is holed up—an' yo're the hombre thet can tell him!"

"An' if I don't take a notion to tell——"

"Yuh will! Burke Cross knows more ways of gettin' information than an Apache Injun. Yuh'll talk—an' be blasted glad to do it!"

"But supposin'——"

"Shet up, hombre! Ain't no use arguin'. Yuh an' me is headin' fer the Crazy Cross. Get to movin'!"

Once more Zeke Olroyd took the trail that led down past the sprawling log cabin in the valley. But this time, instead of Lum beside him, an evil-visaged killer with drawn six-gun rode behind.

Throughout the mile-long ride over the twisting, rocky trail, Zeke rode in silence. In spite of the jeering words of the squat rustler, he held his tongue. Time enough to talk—to explain who he really was—when he faced the leader of the outfit.

At the side of the cabin, Bull Waller called a halt. "The other boys'll be back this way afore long," he rasped. "They're out huntin' fer yuh in the hills to the north. It took Bull Waller to figure out what yuh'd do—an' to stop yuh."

The burly outlaw swung from his saddle and ordered Zeke down. Zeke's brain was in a whirl as the ruffian prodded him to the door.

The outlaw kicked the door open and pushed Zeke inside. Then, still covering the Bar M puncher with his six-gun, Bull rummaged through the shelves in the corner.

At last he grunted in satisfaction as he drew out several sheets of blank paper. He spread one of them on the table. Then he pulled a cartridge from his belt and handed it to Zeke.

"The lead of this here ca'tridge makes a right good pencil. Let me see yuh use it. Write what I tell yuh!"

Zeke's eyes narrowed. He surveyed the big man slowly. "Why don't yuh write it yoreself?"

"Thet's one foolish habit I never l'arned," rasped the outlaw. "Write like I tell yuh!"

Faint hope coursed through Zeke's veins, but only for a second. What was the use of writing anything except what the outlaw dictated? No one would see it except the others of the band, anyway.

"Write thet I have ketched the Pecos Kid's messenger—an' thet I'm headin' fer the Crazy Cross spread," ordered Bull Waller.

With the lead bullet, Zeke wrote. But at the end of the message, he added another sentence:

"The hombre says he is Zeke Olroyd, but I don't believe it."

To the band of outlaws, that sentence would mean nothing. But if it should find the right person, per-

haps—— He shook his head. There was not one chance in a million.

"Sign it 'Bull Waller,' then we'll nail it onto the door," rasped the outlaw.

Now, with the note looming up on the drab door of the cabin for any chance rider to see, the outlaw ordered Zeke into his saddle once more. Straight into the west the two rode—Zeke ahead and the rustler with ready six-gun bringing up the rear.

They splashed across the rushing little creek, out onto the flat stretch beyond, then disappeared over a low ridge into the tangled hills toward the Crazy Cross spread.

But their going did not pass unnoticed. For the golden-haired girl crouched behind a boulder near the hidden opening of the ravine a hundred yards up the stream.

She had crouched there since Zeke and Lum had both left her with Roberto. Her mind was in a turmoil. She herself hardly knew whether or not she could restrain herself if those killers should ride up and fire the cabin.

If only the Bar M was not so far away. If only Zeke could return with Sandy McClure and his riders before the Crazy Cross outfit came back from their fruitless search for Roberto.

Then she had stiffened into a statue when the two riders had come down out of the hill trail. When they pulled up at the cabin, she had recognized Zeke—and knew instantly what had happened.

Her heart sank. Gone was the last chance. Now the Bar M outfit would never receive the call for help. It was the end for Zeke—for Lum—for the Pecos Kid. Yes, and for the little cabin and the meager spread she and her brother had built up so laboriously.

She watched Zeke and the rustler enter the house. Her blue eyes widened as she watched them come out and nail the sheet of paper to the door.

When they disappeared over the ridge, she arose from her concealment and sped to the cabin. Without removing it, she read the message. Now back to the ravine she raced.

Roberto listened wordlessly as she told him what had occurred. When she finished, he arose clumsily to his feet. Gingerly he placed his right foot to the ground. He winced at the pain, but kept it there.

"Me, I have tol' Señor Lum I cannot ride. But now it is of necessity. I am ride for the Bar M. I mus'!"

In spite of Virginia Romney's pleading, the half-breed boy limped painfully to his horse. Clumsily he climbed into the saddle.

"Adios, señorita! A thousand thanks for the so great kindness. Remain in the hiding place! I weel return in three-four days weeth Señor Sandy McClure an' hees men."

Grimly erect, the slender, dark-faced youngster headed his horse up the brush-choked ravine. In a scant five minutes, Virginia Romney was alone.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PECOS KID.

BACK in the depths of the saddle mountain, Lum was urging his blue outlaw horse along the floor of the narrow crack that should lead him to the Pecos Kid. Behind, the great boulder plugged the slash. Above, the sky seemed to draw farther and farther away.

A hundred yards beyond, he shot his glance upward. His breath came fast. It appeared that the slash stretched straight up for a thousand feet. And now he was directly be-

neath the very ridge of the saddle. Apparently the crack cut straight through the mountain.

Then he gave his whole attention to the trail. The hiding place of the Pecos Kid should not be much farther ahead. A half mile into the mountain, the half-breed boy had said. And he must have made almost that distance already.

Ahead he could see a hundred yards. Then the slash bent again in one of its thousands of twistings. He leaned forward in his saddle eagerly.

"Jes' a little mo' speed, Snake! We're gettin' mighty nigh theah!"

He pushed around the bend in the chasm, then pulled to a swift halt. His eyes went wide. For here the crack widened to a full ten feet, and ahead he could see that it was still wider.

And too, light came from ahead as well as filtering down dimly from above as it had before. There could be but one meaning of that. He had come straight through the mountain. The brighter light was from the outside on the opposite slope.

Lum swept the floor ahead with swift glance. There was no one in sight. "Now I wondeh wheah the Pecos Kid——"

Crack! A six-gun barked out, and the report echoed from wall to wall.

Whee-e-e! The bullet zipped by Lum's ear and smacked into the rock behind.

"Stick 'em high, hombre!" The sound of the gun was impossible to place, but this voice came from a niche in the wall of the crack some fifty feet ahead.

Lum shot his hands skyward without any argument. But his heart dropped to his boots. It looked as if his mission was doomed to failure, after all. Evidently the Pecos Kid had been killed or captured, and a guard left to bushwhack whoever followed.

Now a slender, straight-backed form rose from the shadowy niche in the wall. A steady brown hand held a six-gun trained squarely upon Lum. Cold blue eyes looked at him from an expressionless, but cleanly modeled face.

"Climb off yore bronc, hombre! I'm aimin'——"

"The Pecos Kid!" Lum's eager voice broke into the other's order. "Put up yore smoke wagon, Pecos! Cain't yo' see who yo're flingin' lead at? It's Lum! Lum Yates!"

The Pecos Kid leaned forward and his eyes peered into the gloom. Against the light from outside, Lum could see him much plainer than he could be seen.

"Lum! Then Roberto did find yuh! He made a heap quicker trip than I figgered he would!" Dragging his left leg, the Pecos Kid hobbled toward Lum.

And Lum urged Snake forward to meet him. Then he swung from his saddle and thrust out his hand to the Pecos Kid.

"By cricky, I'm glad to see yo' on yore feet, Pecos! I was lookin', from what thet half-breed boy said, to fin' yo' flat on yore back!"

"Jest a bullet through the thigh, son! Mighty painful, an' no chance to ride! But thank goodness, it ain't goin' to be infected!" As he spoke, the Pecos Kid's gaze was searching the slash behind Lum.

"But where's the rest of the Bar M outfit, son? Yuh didn't come alone?"

In terse words, Lum related what had happened. The Pecos Kid listened, his eyes narrowed. Once or twice he shook his head as if in doubt of something.

"Reckon Zeke is well on the trail to the Bar M," Lum ended his ex-

planation. "It'll be mebbe three-fo' days before they get heah, but they'll come a-tearin'!"

"Shore hope so, Lum!" The Pecos Kid spoke slowly, hesitantly. "But Burke Cross is mighty slick. I been on his trail for months. Figured he didn't have no idea any one was after him. Then, first thing I knew, he bushwhacked Roberto an' me. If it hadn't been thet Roberto knew these hills like I know my own face, we'd both been goners!"

"But Zeke'll make it. He's plenty trail-wise." Lum spoke with a certainty that was belied by the doubt that the Pecos Kid had placed in his mind.

"I hope so, son! But when the Bar M outfit comes—if it does—they'll have to handle the deal without us. Thet boulder done shut off our chances of joinin' 'em!"

"Huh?" Lum's eyes went wide. "Then they ain't no otheh way outer this heah crack?"

The Pecos Kid shook his head slowly. "No—thet is, none but what's too dangerous to try. Come on, I'll show yuh."

Leading Snake, Lum followed his limping guide. Fifty yards along the crack, the Pecos Kid indicated another niche in the wall.

"Ground tie yore hoss in there, Lum! He can keep my crow bait company!"

Once more the two men, Lum supporting the Pecos Kid, made their way forward. Around a sharp bend, the Pecos Kid stopped. Not more than twenty yards ahead the crack ended in an arched-over opening.

Lum looked out into the gathering dusk. And as he gazed, spellbound, the first star of the evening pricked out in gray of the darkening sky.

"Go ahead, son, but go mighty careful! It's a sheer drop of five hundred feet to the valley below. Lay flat an' take a look!"

Wonderingly, Lum Yates obeyed. Sprawled on his face, he crawled to the very edge of the opening. His breath came short as he gazed downward.

Down, down, down the smooth rock wall extended. The Pecos Kid had not exaggerated the distance a foot. Then he shot a glance to right and to left.

A narrow ledge, no more than eighteen inches, led from the opening in either direction. To the left, it dwindled away to nothing in a few yards. To the right, it rounded a shoulder of rock. How much farther it extended the Bar M puncher could not tell.

Once more he turned his gaze downward. And this time his eyes swept out across the thickly-wooded valley below. Then a gasp came from his throat.

There, almost in the shadow of the mountain, huddled a sprawling group of buildings. Gazing down from above, they looked like drab splotches in the deep green.

"Thet spread——"

"Thet's the Crazy Cross spread, son. Burke Cross, the worst rustler in the hills runs it. Thet's where the Bar M hosses are corralled. Thet's where the man I'm after holes up."

"Yo' could mighty nigh fling lead at 'em from heah!" said Lum wonderingly. "Why, it don't seem like them buildin's are mo' than——" He stopped suddenly, and his eyes narrowed.

"Come heah, Pecos! Quick!"

In a split second, the Pecos Kid was beside him. And together, they gazed down into the shadows below. Lum's finger pointed.

"See them hosses movin', Pecos? They's two of 'em—an' ridehs on

their backs! Thet one in front—is it—is it sorrel?" His voice trembled as he spoke.

For a moment, the Pecos Kid did not answer. But at last he spoke slowly. "It's sorrel, right enough! But why——"

"Thet gangly hombre ridin' it is Zeke Olroyd, Pecos! I know it is! I can tell by the way he swings in the saddle. They've ketched him, Pecos! They've ketched him—afore he could ride fo' help!"

"Yuh shore, Lum? There couldn't be no mistake?"

Lum shook his head slowly. His heart felt like a lump of lead in his chest.

"Thet's Zeke, right enough!" he said.

"I was afeard he couldn't make it, son. Burke Cross is all fired slick. Slick—an' cruel as a blasted yellow panther!"

"Do yo' think they'll hurt him, Pecos?" There was a pleading note in Lum's voice.

"If he's as smart as I think he is, he'll tell all he knows," said the Pecos Kid. "He couldn't put us in a worse fix than we're in right now. An' mebbe he could save his own hide thet way!"

"Zeke won't tell!" burst out Lum. "He won't tell, no matteh what they do to him! Why, thet'd mean the end of Roberto—an' no tellin' what would happen to Virginia Romney. They cain't burn no information out o' Zeke."

"I hadn't thought of Roberto an' the girl!" said the Pecos Kid softly. "Of course Zeke won't talk."

Then the bronzed man looked out to the valley and shook his clenched fists. "Blast Burke Cross an' his murderin' outfit! If only I had two good legs——"

"Yo' ain't—but I have!" Lum's voice was low and even, but the dullest ear could have detected the thread of steel in it.

"Yuh mean——"

"I'm haidin' down to the Crazy Cross spread!"

"But the crack is plugged, son!"

"I ain't thinkin' about thet crack. I'm takin' to the ledge outside. I don't know wheah it leads. It may peter out in a dozen yards beyond thet hump. But if it does, I'll go down the wall like a fly. I tell yo', I'm goin' to Zeke!"

"I don't know about thet ledge!" answered the Pecos Kid slowly. "Roberto didn't tell me where it leads! There might be a chance of——"

"An' a chance is all I'm askin'!" grated Lum.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE VALLEY.

WITH the Pecos Kid's gun belt about his middle, and his own long squirrel rifle left with the wounded man, Lum slipped out of the opening and set foot on the narrow ledge. The coil of rope about his middle impeded his going only slightly, and left his hands free.

He cast a swift look downward. Darkness filled the valley now. Only the yellow beam of light from the window of the log house below gave evidence of the depth of the valley.

He thanked his lucky stars that it was dark, for now he did not have to fight against the fearful sense of the sheer drop.

Slowly he edged his way along the ledge. Just before he rounded the hump of rock, he caught the Pecos Kid's last words of warning.

His feet inched forward, feeling for every step. Now he was around, and still the ledge stretched forward. But from this point it seemed to drop noticeably. Lum heaved a

shivering sigh of relief. Perhaps it would lead him safely to the floor of the valley, after all.

His going was slow and laborious. He was taking no chances of a misstep and a deadly plunge into space. For a full half hour, he inched ahead, and now the single light from the small cabin window was well behind him.

But, although he hardly dared think of it, he was sure he was much nearer its level. He did not know how much the ledge sloped downward, but he hoped that it was very considerably.

Then he came to a spot where his outstretched foot found only empty space. Here the ledge ended. For a long moment he stood motionless, trying to pierce the blackness below. It was no use.

At last he uncoiled the rope from about his middle. Holding one end, he dropped the other end over the edge. It dangled free. Back and forth he swung it. He was forced to the conclusion that it did not reach the ground.

Now his flying fingers searched the ledge and the rock wall behind. A single stone jutted raggedly out from the wall a few inches. He shook his head. A rope would never hold on it.

Once more he searched, but with no success. Back his hands went to the single stone. Then he reached into his pocket and drew out his long-bladed knife. There was a chance that he could make it.

Carefully he dug and scraped until there was a clearly defined groove about the stone. Swiftly he looped the rope about it and drew it taut. He tugged, and the rope held.

Once more, flat on his face, he picked up a fist-sized rock and dropped it into space. Carefully he counted.

One—two! *Crack!* Two seconds —somewhere near fifty feet, he guessed.

It might be twenty more, but it could not be less, for his rope was almost that long.

He'd have to chance it—there was no other way out. Gritting his teeth to still the shiver that chased itself up and down his back, he let himself over the edge.

Hand over hand he worked his way down, bracing his feet against the smooth wall. After what seemed an interminable time, he reached the knot at the end of the rope.

And now his feet dangled in space. Over his shoulder he looked down. He saw nothing but impenetrable darkness. For ten long seconds, he held on, steeling himself for the drop.

Then he loosed his hold!

Down he went, but brought up almost instantly with a thud that hardly jarred him. The distance could not have been more than a single foot.

He expelled his breath with a great gasp of relief. Then he sank to the ground, trembling with the reaction. But a few seconds was all he allowed himself. He arose and turned to the left.

There, through the interlacing branches of trees, he could make out the single beam of light that came from the hideout of Burke Cross. How far away it was he could only guess.

Now, feeling for every step once more, he headed for the beacon light. The way was very rough. Great rocks loomed up ahead of him. Deep slashes barred his way. Thick brush impeded him. But in spite of that, he made good time.

Hardly an hour after he had first stepped out onto the ledge, he edged into the clearing that surrounded the

Crazy Cross headquarters. And from that point on he redoubled his caution.

Ten minutes of Indian stalking brought him to within fifty yards of the log house. Against the sky line, he could see it loom high. For the first time he realized that this was no squat log cabin, but a big two-story log house.

Light shone from just one window—a window on the lower floor. For a long time he lay on the ground, studying the house. If only he knew where Zeke was held, if only it was light enough to see what——

Then his eyes narrowed and his breath quickened. For a light flickered on in an upper window. There was no curtain to the window, and he could plainly see moving shadows in the oblong of orange light.

Two men had entered the room and moved to the center. Then another form appeared like a jack-in-the-box. The men fumbled with this form. At last two arms stretched out.

Lum was puzzled, but only for a minute. Like a ray of light, the explanation came to him. The form that had popped up was a tightly bound man. The others had fumbled with the ropes and loosed his arms. Perhaps they had brought food for him.

"Zeke! They've got him tied in thet room!"

Now excitement gripped the Bar M waddy. He arose swiftly to his feet and took a step toward the house. Then he stopped. That wouldn't do. He'd have to use all the caution he could muster.

For five minutes, the light shone in the upper window. Then it snuffed out. As if at a signal, Lum moved toward the house. Ten minutes brought him to the log wall. He crouched beneath the lighted window.

The rumble of words came to him, but he could not make out their meaning. Slowly, cautiously he straightened. Standing well back from the glass, he surveyed the interior of the big room.

Eight hard-bitten men lounged in the crude, handmade chairs or sprawled on the bunks. Only one of them seemed to have a care in the world. He was a great, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested man with a shock of grizzled hair above a twisted, evil face.

As this man paced back and forth across the room, turning at intervals to shoot a question at one of the others, Lum studied him. That it was Burke Cross, there could be no doubt.

Once more Lum surveyed the big room, fixing the location of the stairs in his mind. It came down from above very near the back door. He shook his head. No chance there.

Now he drew back into the darkness and looked over the wall of the house. At last he nodded softly. It was dangerous, but he'd have to try it.

At the corners, the end of the logs jutted out raggedly. They would afford hand and toe holds. Forcing himself to slow, cautious movements, Lum began to ascend the corner. He reached the gently sloping roof and swung himself to it.

Then he edged carefully along the roof until he was directly above the window where he had seen the light some minutes before. With his toes hooked over a rough slab of the roof, he leaned far out and down.

His hands found the upper sash of the window. Carefully he pushed downward. The sash moved an inch. Once more he pushed. Luck was with him, for the window had

not been fastened. And now there was a two-foot opening.

The next few minutes were ones of breath-taking suspense and danger. With only the most meager handhold, he let his long body down and thrust his feet through the opening.

Then he loosed his hold and pushed himself into the room. He alighted on the balls of his feet, making hardly more than a tiny thud.

"Zeke! Zeke! Wheah are yo'?" he whispered. For a moment there was no answer.

"Zeke!"

"Who is it? What do yuh want?" came the answering whisper from the side of the room opposite.

"It's Lum, feller! I've come afteh yo'?" On tiptoe, and feeling with his fingers ahead of him, Lum sped toward the spot from which the whisper had come.

Then he touched Zeke's body. His fingers found the ropes that bound the gangly Bar M puncher, and loosed them swiftly.

"Can yo' walk, Zeke? Yo' ain't numb from the ropes?"

"I can make out, Lum! But where are we walkin' to?"

Lum drew erect, startled. That was right. There was no way out except down those stairs and through the corner of the room where the Crazy Cross outfit was gathered. No chance of clambering back to the roof.

For a tense second, Lum stood in indecision. Then his eyes narrowed in the darkness. There was one foolhardy, dangerous way.

"Get ready to high-tail it daown those stairs, Zeke! Don't let no grass grow undeh yore feet, when I give the word! Head straight out into the dark! Then circle to the left and stand fast when yo' reach the wall of rock. Lay low until daylight—unless I fin' yo'. If yo' don't see me when it gets light, slip along the wall until yo' come to a danglin' rope. Climb it—an' pull it up afteh yo'."

"But I ain't agoin' to leave yuh, Lum!"

"I'll make out, son! Do as I tell yo', feller! Ain't I always tol' yo' right?"

Reluctantly Zeke agreed. And now Lum tiptoed back to the window. He snatched the Pecos Kid's six-gun and thrust it out of the window. Holding it well away from the wall, he squeezed the trigger.

The sharp bark echoed back and forth in the quiet of the mountain night. And instantly the pound of booted feet answered below. Then came the loud, hoarse, unintelligible sound of excited voices.

The door down in the main room crashed open and the Crazy Cross outfit thundered out into the darkness, six-guns in ready hands. Lum and Zeke could hear their excited yelling.

"Get goin', Zeke!"

Zeke pulled the door at the head of the stairs open softly. Lum was right behind him. Four steps at a time, the Bar M waddies hurtled down. A single swift glance told told them that the shot had called the whole killer outfit out into the night.

Side by side, Zeke and Lum crashed through the back door, across the narrow slab porch and into the darkness beyond. Twice they brushed past running, excited men. Once they answered a guttural question with an equally guttural reply.

Now they were clear, and speeding toward the perpendicular wall of the mountain some five hundred yards away. Then, loud and clear came a yell from the house.

"Burke! Thet hombre is loose! He's high-tailed it!"

"Spread out an' get him! He can't go far in the dark." Evil and cruelty filled the rasping tone of that voice.

"Keep movin', son!" snapped Lum. "Remembeh what I tol' yo'!" And now he swerved from Zeke's side and crouched behind a boulder.

No chance for both of them to win free, with the eight hard-bitten killers searching for them. He'd stay and cover Zeke's retreat. He had a six-gun, at least, and Zeke was unarmed.

Ten minutes passed. Then as Lum listened with straining ears, he caught the thump of booted feet and the rattle of brush ahead. He arose silently to his feet.

His hand grasped a fist-sized stone. He heaved it high, and in the opposite direction from the one Zeke had taken. It crashed down through the brush with a sound as of some one plowing his way through it.

A hoarse grunt came from the unseen man ahead. He swerved in the direction of the sound. And as he hurtled forward, he bellowed a call to the others.

"Here he is, hombres! Hurry! We'll get him!"

As the rest of the killer outfit converged upon the spot, Lum moved silently off in the other direction. For an hour, he played the game, tolling the Crazy Cross gang back and forth in the darkness.

Then, silently and cautiously, he backed into the darkness. Through the brush and around the huge boulders he wormed his way until he brought up against the smooth wall of the perpendicular crag.

With it as his guide, he sped toward the spot where he had left the dangling rope. Only his sense of distance could be relied upon to tell him when he was near it. And when he thought he had covered this distance, he crouched down in the shelter of a boulder.

Zeke should be somewhere close, but it was dangerous to attempt to find the gangly waddy. He had told Zeke to wait until the first light of day, and Zeke would take him at his word.

Off in the direction from which he had come, Lum could hear the faint yells of the still searching killers. A thin smile flicked across his face. As long as the search was that far away, he was safe.

Hour after slow hour passed. Lum began to feel the chill of the mountain night in every bone. Several times he arose and stretched his long legs, swung his arms for warmth.

Once he came to startled attention as he thought he heard something moving out in the pitch darkness. But straining ears did not catch a repetition of the sound. At last he decided it must have been some prowling animal.

And now a faint pink, the first false dawn, stretched in streamers up the eastern sky. In another half hour it would be light enough to see the dangling rope. He rose to his feet eagerly.

Then he crouched once more. For an hour or more he had heard no sounds from the pursuers. But now a sudden yell came from not more than a hundred yards along the wall.

CHAPTER IX.

CORNERED.

AND within a minute of that yell, he heard the threshing of clumsy bodies in the brush, still closer. With safety so near, the rustlers had at last found his trail.

Once more he got to his feet! Crouching low, he sped from his

cover! He shot a swift glance up the face of the wall! Already the shadows were fading a bit! He could make out the jagged, outthrust end of the ledge!

It was no more than fifty yards away, and he redoubled his speed! As he raced, he breathed a prayer that Zeke was beneath the rope end, and waiting to climb up!

Now a great boulder loomed up directly in his path. He slowed his pace to round it. Then he stopped short, a gasp hissing suddenly from his throat.

For at that very instant, a raspy voice came to his ears from the other side of the rock.

"I had yuh figured out, hombre! Yuh thought yuh'd get away, huh? It ain't so easy to escape Burke Cross. I remembered about thet ledge. Knowed yuh had a pardner to help yuh. I got yuh now, an' when yore pardner shows up, I'll rope him in."

So it was Burke Cross that Lum had heard some minutes ago—Burke Cross stealing through the brush to wait for him and Zeke beneath the ledge. And the killer had caught Zeke.

Behind came the threshing of the others of the evil outfit. Lum did not hesitate a second. He snatched the six-gun from its holster and thumbed the hammer back.

With the silence and ferocity of a panther, he streaked around the boulder. In the gray half light his eyes caught a burly body beside the boulder. One thick arm was outstretched and stubby fingers were wound in Zeke's collar!

One more step. The muzzle of the six-gun, round and cold, pressed Burke Cross's hairy neck!

"Grab a handful of clouds, yo' skunk!"

Lum's voice matched in coldness the muzzle of his gun. With a startled grunt, the outlaw's hands went high. Zeke leaped back as the fingers loosened on his collar!

"Get his guns, Zeke!" Lum's voice was low and even. "Them otheh waddies are comin', but we'll make a stand heah! An' if the end comes, Burke Cross will get his first."

Zeke needed no second order. He leaped to the killer and snatched out the six-guns. The ruffian swore like a snarling animal, but he did not dare move.

Then Lum's eyes narrowed. "If yo' want to save yore measly hide, yo'll tell yore men to stay clear," he rasped. "The minute the firs' one rounds thet boulder, I'm pullin' the trigger!"

He could feel Burke Cross shudder beneath the muzzle that pressed his neck. Choking words came from the outlaw's throat.

"It won't do yuh no good," he snarled. "Yuh can't get away."

"Get busy! Tell 'em to stay clear!" snapped Lum.

Now the big man raised his voice. "Stay back, hombres!" he yelled. "They got the drop on me. But circle this here rock. They can't hold out for long."

Startled exclamations came from the other advancing outlaws. More threshing in the brush, then silence. For a full fifteen minutes, not a further sound reached the breathless, excited Bar M punchers.

Now the dawn had come and the gray shadows had given way to the light of day. A swift glance upward told Lum that the rope still dangled down from the ledge. He looked at it longingly. Escape so near, but now impossible.

He cudgeled his mind for some way out of this jam. For as long as he could keep Burke Cross covered, they would be safe from capture or

death, but that time was limited. This looked like the end.

Another fifteen minutes of silence. Then suddenly, a wild yell burst from the men out in the brush. Lum caught his breath sharply. Crashing sounds of men hurtling through the tangle split the air.

Then, from far off came the bark of a six-gun! Then another and another! Burke Cross stiffened beneath the muzzle of the six-gun. It was plain that he was as startled as Lum.

Now the faint pound of horses' hoofs reached Lum's straining ears, then a yell that he was not sure he understood. Once more it sounded!

"Lum! Zeke! Hi, waddies!"

Lum whirled to Zeke. "Thet's Benny Burnett's voice, Zeke! I'd know it in a million!"

"Benny! Here! Come a-tearin'!" Lum's high, clear young voice rang out.

The pound of hoofs thundered nearer. Lum stepped cautiously from behind the boulder. A smile flicked across his face. For no more than a hundred yards away, and racing through the brush and around the boulders, were a full dozen riders.

Lum snatched off his wide Stetson in his left hand, his right fist with the long six-gun still covering Burke Cross.

"Heah, Benny! Oveh heah!"

The dozen riders slithered to a halt before the two young punchers and their snarling prisoner. Lum recognized Benny Burnett and old "Sandy" McClure and the rest of the Bar M waddies. Then his eyes went wide!

For the Pecos Kid was there, his face twisted with pain, but erect in his saddle. Roberto, too—and Virginia Romney. And beside the golden-haired girl, a blond, square-shouldered rider that must be her brother.

"Heah's yore prisoner, Pecos!" Lum's voice was curiously flat and even, as if he were holding in his emotion with great effort.

"We was mighty nigh goners. Don't reckon we could have kept him many hours, what with them hombres ready to pick us off! Yo' came jes' in time!" Then his eyes narrowed. "But how did yo' get outer thet slash, Pecos?"

"Didn't take more than a little shove to send thet rock crashin' on down an' out inter the valley. I heerd thet ruckus goin' on down here in the dark, an' knowed I had to make it."

And now Sady McClure broke in. "But yuh owe a lot to Roberto here, Lum. We was on yore trail, but not a whole lot worried about yuh until he come a-tearin' up. It takes plenty grit to ride, with a hole through yore leg."

"Virginia's got a heap o' credit comin', too," Lum spoke softly. "If she hadn't defied Burke Cross an' his outfit, an' hid Roberto, Zeke an' me would likely have rammed right square inter a hornet's nest."

"But after all, Lum Yates is the waddy thet captured Burke Cross," said the Pecos Kid. "An' I know him well enough to be certain he'd have kept his prisoner until help come, if it was a year!"

And now the Pecos Kid looked at Sandy McClure. "Yore hosses'll be in the Crazy Cross corral, more than likely. An' they won't be no one to stop yuh snakin' 'em out. The Crazy Cross outfit is plenty scattered—an' they'll never bother us again."

"And Fred and I will be safe. We'll not have to fear them again," broke in Virginia Romney, vast relief in her voice.

The Pecos Kid nodded. Then he grinned at Lum.

"Yore blue outlaw hoss, Snake, is safe an' sound, son. I brought him down out o' the slash, when I come. Reckon thet's what interests yuh most, right now."

Lum's face lighted up. "Of course, I'm glad yo're safe, Pecos, an' glad thet the Crazy Cross is busted up. But with Snake waitin' fo' me, they ain't nothin' mo' I need to be plumb teetotally happy."

Things shore looked bad fer Lum an' Zeke there, fer a while. They was up agin' as slick a bunch o' crooks as they ever have been—an' thet's sayin' a lot. Howsomever, anybody smart enough ter escape some o' Lum's tricks is too danged smart ter be an outlaw. Watch fer the next story about the two young Bar M waddies. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

WHEN INDIANS WERE ON THE WARPATH

ADVENTURE began early for boys in Texas in the old days. A pioneer who died not very long ago, Charles Binion, was sent out by his father when he was about nine years old, to make some purchases for the family. The trading post was several miles distant from the Binion home, but young Charles had a good horse, and he had already made that trip many times, so distance meant nothing to him.

He reached the trading post without accident, made his purchases, and started back for home with the bundles securely fastened behind and before. He was trotting along leisurely when a band of Comanches appeared suddenly.

They were near enough to see the bundles, and also to see the fine points of the horse that young Binion rode. They wheeled their ponies and went galloping after the boy. But his horse was faster than any of their ponies, and he soon drew away from his pursuers.

As he was racing along, he passed a large oak tree, under the spreading branches of which a Mexican sheep-herder was taking his noon rest in blissful contentment. Charles took time to check his horse long enough to yell to the dozing Mexican: "Here, you, hurry, run, get out of here! The Comanches are galloping this way. Hide quick, or they'll catch up with you!"

In telling this story Binion would add: "He didn't, and they did."

Charles Binion could ride before he could walk steadily. While still a youth, he was a top hand on some of the biggest outfits, such as the XIT, the ORO, the Matador, Spear Brothers, and others. He was a typical cowboy, and there were few men in the cattle country who were as fast with a rope as Charlie Binion.

He spent his money like the rest of them in the wild cow towns, but he was able to draw full wages as a cowhand until about a year before he died, although he was over eighty.

When he hit the long trail, he had little else but his saddle and bridle, a trunk of old cowboy clothes, and a host of friends among the old cattlemen and cowboys. He enjoyed recounting his experiences, and as he told his stories of the old days with wit and humor, he always had a crowd of eager listeners.

The Whistlin' Kid at the K Bar

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid At Spanish Mesa," etc.

DANGER was in the very air. Pete Prentiss—crack range detective for the Cattlemen's Association, and better known as the "Whistlin' Kid"—realized that he was up against terrible odds.

But the mournful tune of "The Cowboy's Lament" still came in a low whistle from the Kid's puckered lips. For hours, as he rode his big buckskin gelding, Speed, along the rough trails of the border range country, he had calmly whistled his favorite tune or smoked brown paper quirlies.

"So this is Dead Man's Range, huh!" muttered the Kid to himself, reining up his mount on the rim of a mesa that shelved off abruptly to the bottom of a winding canyon.

It was a wild, desolate land; what with the *malpais,* or bad lands, on one hand and high, wind-swept mesas on the other. A fitting country to bear such an evil name, gained by the many murderous crimes committed on its lawless soil.

The Kid's darkly tanned, hawkish face was grim, his dark eyes gleamed coldly as he scanned the forbidding landscape. Since morning, he had traveled far, yet nearly every head of stock he had seen bore the iron mark of the K Bar Ranch.

"Cougar Kenton has been carryin' things with a high hand on this range," reflected the Kid. "Accordin' to reports, him and his hired killers has blotted the brands on darn near every cow critter belongin' to his neighbors. And he's gettin' away with it, 'count of all the decent people up this a way bein' already killed or expectin' to be."

It was a dim, seldom-used trail that the Kid was following. As he urged the buckskin over the mesa rim, his keen eyes picked out its snaky course down the steep slope. Here and there, it wriggled between masses of jagged rocks. More than once it skirted clumps of dark-hued juniper and piñon pines. For dry-gulching a lone rider, this country was made to order.

Yet, there was no sign of fear on the young range dick's rugged features. The doleful tune of the "Lament," the constant whistling of which had gained him his odd nickname, again rose on the late-afternoon air. To all appearances, he was just a drifting waddy.

"Reckon I ought to be nearin' Old Man Terrill's spread," the Kid told himself, after he had ridden up the curving canyon trail for more than a mile.

Terrill was an elderly cowman who had been one of the first to run cattle in this region. For many years, he had prospered. Then came the man known as "Cougar" Kenton.

Ruthless, with the killer instinct of the wild animal for which he was nicknamed, Cougar Kenton had changed conditions on this isolated range in a very short time. Cowmen were shot in the back from ambush. Some were goaded into saloon brawls and wiped out by Kenton or the gunmen who rode for him. Cattle were rustled wholesale.

From a peaceful cow country, where the few ranchers had followed the live-and-let-live policy, Vaca County had been ravaged by the K Bar ruffians until it had finally been given the name of Dead Man's Range.

With his range practically cleaned of stock, his cow-punchers dry-gulched or scared out of the country, Terrill had at last taken the step that he should have taken in the beginning of the trouble. He had called on the Cattlemen's Association for help.

So it happened that the Whistlin' Kid was riding up the canyon trail that led to the Slash T Ranch, this sun-baked day of late summer. He had been told that Terrill's home ranch lay in the bottom of this deep canyon, at a point where it widened to an extent that made excellent winter quarters for the cattle that grazed on the mesas during the summer.

Unaccountably, the Kid felt a prickling of his scalp, a tingling of the veins in his range-hardened, sinewy hands, as he neared the location where he believed the Slash T ranch house to be. It was a not uncommon experience with the young cow dick. It had always meant approaching trouble before.

Yet, the Kid had already passed through the most dangerous section of Dead Man's Range that day. Surely, there could be no cause for fear in approaching "Old Man" Terrill's headquarters.

Riding warily, while the buckskin's steel-shod hoofs rang on the rocky canyon trail, the Kid heard the sharp crack of a rifle. Instantly, he reined Speed, the buckskin, to a quick halt, sat listening for whatever sound might follow. Was it a hunter, or——

"Dead Man's Range!" muttered

the Kid under his breath. "I got a hunch somethin's wrong around here."

Pushing fearlessly onward, the Kid quickly reached a sharp bend in the canyon. As he rounded it, he noted the rapid widening of the canyon bottom.

"The house ought to be in sight, when I round this turn," decided the Kid. "And thet shot must have been fired right close to it."

Another fifty yards was quickly covered by the fox-trotting buckskin. And as the Kid had thought, there lay the home ranch of the Slash T spread.

It was a comfortable, homy-looking place—a roomy log house, with outbuildings and corrals, set down in the midst of a long stretch of grassy canyon meadow. A few cows and several head of saddle horses were grazing near the upper end of the meadow. Smoke came from the stone chimney of the ranch house. There was no sign of armed men.

"Reckon I was too easy stirred up by thet shootin'," the Kid told himself. "Likely it was some waddy takin' a crack at a lobo wolf over yonder in the chaparral at the foot of the canyon wall."

There was a thick clump of junipers at one side of the log house. Again the Kid felt that prickling of his scalp as he rode past the dense cover of the trees.

"Howdy, there young feller! Light down an' stretch yore legs. I'm Hank Terrill."

The Kid reined up his horse and gave a quick look at the man who had suddenly appeared in the doorway of the log house.

"Howdy, Mr. Terrill!" he answered the others apparently hospitable greeting.

As he swung down out of the saddle, he had a feeling of disappointment. Somehow, he hadn't pictured Old Man Terrill as looking at all as this man in the doorway looked.

Lanky, bullet-headed, with a cruel mouth half hidden by a scraggly, tobacco-stained sandy mustache, the hombre who greeted the Kid was far from pleasing in appearance. His eyes—expressionless, heavy-lidded, greenish-hued—made the young range dick's hair bristle as he met their unblinking gaze.

Old Man Terrill? Why, this man couldn't be a day over fifty. And yet, the Kid reflected, ranch owners were often called "Old Man" as soon as their first gray hairs came in their forties. And what object could any one have in impersonating the owner of the Slash T?

"Reckon it must be Terrill, all right, but I sure don't like his looks," thought the Kid, as he came up to the door where his host-to-be awaited him.

II.

Moved by common range courtesy, the Kid was on the verge of introducing himself and showing his credentials. But as he opened his mouth to speak his name, such a strong feeling of distrust for Terrill surged over him, that he bit back the words.

"Yuh done picked up plenty trail dust fer one day, son. I'll take it as a favor tuh have you eat an' sleep afore yuh hit the trail ag'in. I git mighty lonesome here."

Terrill seemed sincere enough in giving this hospitable invitation. His thin mouth broke into what was meant to be a friendly smile of welcome.

"I'm thankin' you," said the Kid, entering the house.

He had quickly decided that he would stay and get a little better

acquainted with Terrill before stating his business.

Range custom decreed that the Kid should unbuckle his gun belt and hang his heavy six-gun on the wall as soon as he came into his host's home. He saw Terrill's .45 hanging in plain sight on a hook just inside the door. Without hesitating, the Kid stepped over to the wall and hung up his own Colt.

And although custom also prevented Terrill from asking questions concerning his youthful visitor's name and business, the Kid could read the unspoken questions on his host's weathered face. Common courtesy required him to tell something of himself.

"I'm mostly called the Kid by my friends," said the young cow dick. "What the others call me don't make no difference. And I ain't aimin' to linger long around these parts."

"Uh-huh, I git yuh!" Terrill nodded, with a knowing leer. "Waal, yuh ain't got nothin' tuh worry about, long as yuh stick around the Slash T. I've done a little dodgin' myself in my day."

The Kid let it go at that. He had told his host no lies. If the fellow chose to understand that the Kid was on the dodge, a range crook, he would not set him right for a while yet.

Terrill was still standing near the open door of the cabin. The observing Kid had noted that the rancher seemed much interested in Speed. He was not surprised when Terrill voiced his admiration of the buckskin, which stood quietly in the shade of a juniper.

"Thet big geldin' is a shore 'nough king hoss, young feller," Terrill said, after several keen glances at Speed.

"He takes me where I want to go and brings me back," said the Kid.

"Yeah, he would," agreed Terrill, turning from the door and going toward a cookstove in a rear corner of the room. "An' now I'll jest throw a couple of beefsteaks on tuh fry. Reckon yo're plenty hungry."

"Don't cook up nothin' special fer me," said the Kid. "I'll wait till your waddies comes in off the range."

"Yuh'd be plumb starved," said Terrill. "I ain't got but one rider, an' he's clear over on Red Mesa tuhday. Won't be back afore late this evenin'."

"I thought mebbe thet was one of your cowpokes doin' the shootin' as I rode up the canyon," observed the Kid.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, thet was me," Terrill hastened to state, with an air of easiness that the Kid thought was a bit overdone. "I slung a slug of lead at a coyote thet was prowlin' through the canyon. Done it jest tuh keep in practice with a .30-30."

The explanation sounded reasonable enough. The Kid made no further comment. He had noticed the rifle standing in a corner of the cabin. But that wasn't the only thing the keen-eyed young cow dick had observed.

Two bunks, one built above the other, occupied a corner of the room. Beside them hung two outfits of range clothes. And what interested the Kid was the fact that neither bunch of wearing apparel seemed of a size to fit the lanky Terrill. Plainly, they were for stocky-built men.

The Kid made no mention of his interesting discovery. He turned the buckskin in with several other horses in a corral a hundred yards from the cabin, and fed it both hay and grain. After that, he ate a hearty meal himself, of hot steak

and cold biscuits, washed down with three cups of strong coffee.

All the while, Terrill had been carefully sizing up the Kid, although pretending to pay little attention to his youthful visitor, while preparing the meal. Several times, the Kid had glanced quickly at his host, surprising him in an evil stare that sent the prickling sensation creeping over his scalp again.

After eating, both men sat back and smoked, the Kid rolling his own brown paper quirlies, while Terrill puffed on a villainous-smelling clay pipe. Conversation lagged, as both men seemed to prefer their own thoughts.

If the Kid could have known what was going on in the back of his host's bullet-shaped head, he would not have rested so easily. As it was, he continued to smoke calmly, occasionally whistling a few low notes of the "Cowboy's Lament."

The sun had gone down, and the short twilight of the rough country was rapidly turning to complete darkness, when Terrill arose from his chair and walked to the front door. The two six-guns hung within arm's reach of him. He mentioned easily that he was going to listen for hoofbeats, which would indicate the home-coming of his absent waddy.

Off guard for a moment, the Kid turned his back to light a cigarette on a live coal which he scraped out of the fire onto the stove hearth.

A suspicious sound, the slight creak of a gun belt, caused the Kid to whirl in his tracks.

There stood Terrill, facing him, six-gun in hand!

"Reward-grabber, huh!" said the Kid evenly. "Think I'm wanted somewhere by the law and you aim to turn me over to a sheriff, I reckon. But you got a surprise comin' to you, Terrill."

"An' yuh got me wrong," retorted the lanky hombre, with an evil smile. "The surprise is on yuh."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin' yuh made a turrible mistake by dropping in on the Slash T jest when yuh did. Yuh know too dang much. I aim tuh beef yuh!"

"How come?" snapped the Kid. "Ain't you Terrill? How do you figure I got anything on you?"

"Yuh got plenty on me. I ain't Terrill, an' yuh been suspicionin' I ain't. So yuh ain't foolin' me none with thet line of talk yuh been givin' me. An' long as I aim tuh drill yuh so yuh can't tell nobody yuh seen me here, I'll tell yuh who I am."

The lanky hombre paused a moment, as if he expected to enjoy the surprise and terror of his intended victim. But the Kid gave no sign of any such feelings. His hawkish face was grim and his dark eyes gleamed fearlessly in the yellow light of the old-fashioned oil lamp that sat on a rough table between him and the man with the gun.

"Happen mebbe yuh've heard of the killers of the K Bar. Waal, I'm Bullet Harper, the ace of the bunch, barrin' only the boss hisself, Cougar Kenton," went on the gunman, with a note of boastfulness in his rasping voice. "I was sent here tuh finish off Old Man Terrill an' his last remainin' ranny. Got 'em both! Then up yuh come, afore I could git in the clear."

"So now you aim to make it three straight fer the day, huh," said the Kid slowly, to gain time for a desperate move that he planned as a last resort. "Thet's a right good score, even fer sich a low-down, back-shootin' skunk as you."

"Uh-huh," said "Bullet" Harper, with about the same air with which he would have discussed killing a

steer for the ranch larder. "Dead hombres don't spill no beans. With yuh out o' the way, there's no proof of murder agin' me. So if yuh got any last words or prayers tuh say, git 'em out o' yore system quick. I aim tuh fork thet big buckskin of yores an' be on my way pronto."

The Kid made no reply. From force of habit, his firm lips puckered to whistle a few low bars of the mournful "Cowboy's Lament." He realized that death—a terrible, uncalled-for death—stared him in the face.

This cutthroat, Bullet Harper, was not bluffing. The Kid had seen his type before—a cold, merciless killer. Nothing that the Kid could say would swerve him from his purpose.

"Reckon thet graveyard tune yo're allus whistlin' is about the same as a prayer," remarked Bullet Harper, with an evil grin on his gaunt face.

Still the Kid said nothing. While appearing to be unconcerned over his fate, he was actually tensed, every nerve alert. For a faint sound, like the snapping of a twig, had come to his ears through the open window at his back. Was it some one who might aid him in his terrible danger, or just a prowling beast?

"Waal, seein' as yo're sort o' resigned tuh yore fate, I reckon we might's well git this over with," Harper said, leveling his .45 at the Kid's heart.

In spite of his resolve to make a quick finish of his victim, Bullet Harper hesitated. Steeped in crime as he was, he could not help admiring the Kid's nerve. Never had he seen a man show such coolness in the face of certain death. Well, everybody had to die some time, reasoned Bullet, beginning to tighten his finger on the trigger.

But that brief moment in which the Kid's courage had stayed the killer's hand, was enough to give the youthful range dick a fighting chance for his life.

Before the hammer fell, Bullet Harper suddenly gasped an exclamation of alarm, his little greenish-hued eyes widened with fear. Intensely superstitious, as men of his type are likely to be, he believed, for a moment, that he was seeing a ghost.

For a head had appeared in the open window directly back of the Kid. A face that was streaked with crimson, gray hair matted and stringy, met Bullet's horrified gaze.

"Old Man Terrill's ghost!" cried the unnerved killer, unconsciously lowering the muzzle of the six-gun that covered the Kid.

III.

His quick wit and iron nerve had carried the Whistlin' Kid through many a desperate situation. They didn't fail him now. This was his fighting chance, and he took it.

Without so much as a backward glance to see what was at the window, the Kid leaped forward.

In mid-stride, his outstretched hands struck the edge of the table. It went over, hurling the lamp violently to the floor.

In utter darkness now, the Kid's charge carried the table a few feet farther. Its sharp edge struck the surprised gunman, Bullet Harper, on the shins. He went backward, out through the open door.

Instantly the Kid grabbed for his gun that hung on the wall.

Armed once more, his daring ruse a complete success, the young range dick bounded after his murderous enemy.

Bra-ang! As the Kid dashed out

through the cabin door, a six-gun roared. He felt the tug of a bullet, like the touch of ghostly fingers, on the sleeve of his gray flannel shirt.

In the dim starlight, the Kid made out the crouching form of the killer, intent on filling him with lead as he came out of the cabin.

Wham! Bang! Twice the Kid's Colt .45 rocketed flame and lead.

The crouching gunman slumped limply to the ground. The Kid heard the brief, spasmodic kicking of boot toes on the hard gravel ground.

"Reckon thet finished him," the Kid muttered grimly to himself. "There wasn't no other way, not with an hombre as plumb pizen as him."

Warily he walked over to the huddled figure. There was no movement. Quickly the Kid felt for Bullet Harper's heart. His fingers came away wet from the welling flood of crimson that was soaking the vicious gunman's shirt.

Turning back to the cabin, the Kid saw the indistinct form of a man stagger round a corner of the house.

"My name's Terrill. Who are yuh?" asked a weak voice.

"I'm the cow dick yuh sent fer—Prentiss, of the C. A.," answered the Kid.

"Did yuh git thet skunk?"

"He's done cashed in," said the Kid, approaching the wounded ranchman. "And now, if you'll tell me where I can find another lamp, I'll light things up."

"There's a lantern hangin' back of the stove."

The Kid reëntered the cabin, followed by Terrill. When the lantern was lighted, each man sized up the other quickly. The Kid saw a typical cowman of the old West. Terrill was in his sixties, heavy of frame, tough as a pine knot. His hair and long cowhorn mustache were iron-gray.

Terrill was the first to speak. "Waal, I'll be gosh-dinged!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "Why, yuh ain't nothin' but a youngster. Here I was expectin' the 'sociation tuh send me one of their experienced old-timers. This here's a tough case."

"Reckon I made a fair-to-middlin' start on it," chuckled the Kid. "'Cordin' to Bullet Harper's own opinion, he was about the killin'est hombre on Dead Man's Range, leavin' out his boss."

"Thet's right," admitted Terrill. "An' yuh beefed him, after givin' him the first shot. I'd shore like tuh see the man thet sent him here git the same dose."

"Meanin' Cougar Kenton of the K Bar?"

"Uh-huh. Cougar's been wantin' my range an' the rest of my cows, so he finally sends this here Bullet hombre over here tuh git me. Happened thet Shorty Hines—the only waddy I had left—rode in ahead of me. He got killed. Harper dropped him from his hoss an' dragged him into the junipers.

"Then he set thar in the cabin, waitin' fer me. Soon as I got in close range, he threw down on me. Only creased me, but I fell offn my bronc, an' Harper took me fer dead. Thet's all I know, but I kin easy figure out the rest of the yarn."

"Yuh figger Bullet heard me comin' and didn't have time to do nothin' but drag you into the brush," shrewdly guessed the Kid.

"Yuh said it," rejoined Terrill. "He was in too big a hurry. An' 'stead of killin' yuh when yuh first rode up, Bullet had a curiosity tuh know who yuh was an' what yuh

was doin' way out here. Thet curiosity gave me time tuh come tuh my senses an' ramble up tuh thet window jest as Bullet was ready tuh drop yuh."

"It was sure a lucky break fer me," agreed the Kid. "But what about yourself? Hadn't you better let me tie up thet head?"

"Go tuh it, son. It's shore achin' aplenty."

While the Kid deftly bound up the elderly cowman's wounded head, he sought more information regarding the rustling and killing that had been going on over Dead Man's Range.

"What sort of a move do you figger Kenton was aimin' to make, after he had you out of the way?" asked the Kid.

"He's jest startin' his round-up. Wanted to clean up the rest of my stock without havin' anybody hinderin' him," explained Old Man Terrill. "Yuh see, I was aimin' tuh send my waddy over tuh join the K Bar round-up crew as a rep."

"Uh-huh, I see," said the Kid slowly. "Waal, supposin' you was to send me as your rep?"

"It'd be turrible risky. More so, 'count of yore killin' this Harper hombre. An' Cougar is mighty cunnin'. He'd play tricks on yuh tuh keep yuh from findin' out anythin'."

"It's part of my job to take risks, and likewise to outsmart rustlers," the Kid reminded Terrill.

"I reckon yuh'll go, if thet's the way yuh look at it," said the grizzled cowman. "But I shore hate tuh think of a kid like yuh goin' up agin' them K Bar killers."

"I'll be on my way as soon as daylight comes," coolly declared the young range dick. "And meantime we'll dispose of what's left of Harper, so's Kenton and his gang won't know what happened to him. Thet'll give me a better chance to get in with 'em."

Daylight found the Kid well on his way to the K Bar home ranch. He and Old Man Terrill had risen while it was still dark and eaten a hasty breakfast.

By taking a short cut through the hills, which Terrill had told him about, the Kid hoped to reach Cougar Kenton's place before the round-up crews went out on the morning circle.

Whistling his favorite air of the "Lament," the Kid sent Speed, the buckskin, along at the best pace possible in such a rough country.

Late-prowling animals slunk into the chaparral at the sound of the horse's clattering hoofs. As he passed the mouth of a brushy canyon, a mountain lion snarled at him across the carcass of a freshly killed buck deer.

"Killers everywhere, man and beast," reflected the Kid, reminded of the ruthless Cougar Kenton by this bared-fanged beast that faced him.

It was still very early in the morning when the Kid rode up to the K Bar ranch house. He was barely in time. A scar-faced foreman was giving final directions to a bunch of surly ruffians as to the morning work on circle. Several groups of twos and threes were already riding away.

"Howdy!" said the Kid, reining up near the stocky, bull-necked foreman, whose face had evidently been plentifully carved up in some past brawl.

"What yuh want?" snapped the foreman.

"To see Kenton," the Kid answered evenly.

"Yuh cain't, he's done rode down tuh Dogie Center tuh order a string of cattle cars fer shippin' beef.

Won't be back till afternoon. I'm Scar Halsey, ramrod of this here spread."

"Waal, I reckon you'll do, then," said the Kid. "I'm here to rep fer the Slash T. I'll take your orders as to where I ride circle."

"What's thet? Reppin' fer old Terrill?" exclaimed the astonished foreman. "Why, I thought thet old Ter——"

The scarred foreman checked himself suddenly, as if he had been about to give away some damaging bit of information.

"What the heck does the old coot want tuh send a rep up here fer? I ain't seen no cows wearin' his iron mark on K Bar Range fer months," went on the foreman. "An' anyways, it ain't no job fer a slick-ear kid like yuh."

"The 'kid' part of it shouldn't worry *you* none," coldly retorted the Kid, realizing that his unlined face, with its lack of bristles such as the coarse faces around him wore, had deceived the foreman into thinking him inexperienced. "Tell me where to ride. If I don't uncover no Slash T critters, thet's Terrill's hard luck."

"Meanin' yuh think we got some of 'em hid up?" flared the foreman.

"Meanin' I'm here to ride on your round-up, as per custom on every range I know anything about," replied the Whistlin' Kid.

"Waal, go on an' ride, then!" savagely snarled the foreman. "Go along with them two rannies thet's headin' fer Blind Hoss Canyon."

The Kid glanced at the two punchers indicated. They were a tough-looking pair. With contemptuous sneers at the youthful rider assigned to accompany them, they spurred their broncs to racing speed across a sage flat stretching away to the hills. But not before they had caught a meaning glance from the angry foreman.

The Kid gave no hint that he, too, had seen that look. But it was not lost on him. He understood that it meant for the two villainous-looking rannies to mislead him as to the whereabouts of any Slash T stock. And doubtless it also meant danger to the Kid himself, in case he proved difficult to handle.

Touching his eager buckskin lightly with the spurs, the Kid went racing after the K Bar rannies. Although their mounts were fresh and fast, they were no match for Speed. The rangy buckskin tore after them at a pace that quickly brought it alongside the straining cow ponies.

The Kid paid no attention to the black looks received from his hard-bitten companions. He had no quarrel with them personally—not yet, at least.

IV.

Reaching the edge of the *malpais*, the three riders climbed a piñon-covered ridge. After following the crest of the hogback till they came to the head of a canyon, they drew rein.

"Me an' Tug will take the sides. Yuh ride the bottom," said one of the hombres—a pale-eyed ruffian with almost colorless hair and eyebrows, who was called "Whitey."

The Kid nodded his approval of the arrangement. The two K Bar rannies spoke together in low tones for a moment, then separated to ride opposite sides of the canyon.

Apparently the layout was favorable to the Kid. As the two K Bar riders combed the chaparral-covered canyon sides, the cattle would naturally seek the bottom. It would be the Kid's job to keep all the stock gathered moving steadily down to the mouth of the canyon. He would

be able to spot any of Old Man Terrill's cows and see that they were not left behind.

"This here deal is a little too much like it was made to order," reflected the Kid, as he rode slowly down the canyon, picking up a few head of cows here and there along the brushy, boulder-strewn bottom.

Familiar with the tricks of rustlers, the Kid had no doubt that there was at least one hideout, perhaps several, of Slash T cattle up here in these rugged canyon of the *malpais*. If Blind Horse Canyon held such a secret cache, it would be next to impossible for the Kid to discover it from the floor of the canyon.

After nearly a mile of the winding cleft in the hills had been covered, the young range dick found himself hazing a good-sized bunch of cows. Well up on the sloping sides above him, he could hear the two K Bar rannies whooping more critters out of the chaparral.

Alert for any sign of trickery on the part of his hard-bitten companions, the Kid's watchfulness was rewarded after a while.

The man called Whitey seemed to spend more time than was necessary at a small pocket or side canyon which branched off behind a thicket of scrubby jack pines. When the K Bar riders had finally worked on down the canyon to a safe distance, the Kid reined his buckskin up the slope and through the trees.

The bawl of a steer came distinctly to his ears. He pushed on through the thick chaparral. And less than a hundred yards from the main canyon, the Kid found what he sought.

A fence of brush and poles had been thrown across the narrow, steep-walled box canyon. Inside the inclosure was a small herd of fat steers.

"Slash Ts, every critter of 'em!" muttered the Kid to himself, standing up in his stirrups to look over the fence and inspect his find.

But there had been no tampering with the brands. In fact, as the Kid looked closely at Old Man Terrill's steers, he realized that it would be impossible to make a K Bar iron mark out of a Slash T. And the cunning Cougar Kenton hombre could plausibly deny any intention of blotting Terrill's brand, if accused in court of trying to rustle the Slash T cattle.

"Then how the heck does Kenton market Old Man Terrill's cows?" the Kid asked himself.

For a few moments, he studied over the puzzling matter, all the while whistling low notes of the doleful "Cowboy's Lament." Then he reached in a saddle pocket where he always carried several brand-registry books. Selecting one of the small volumes, he hurriedly turned to a certain page.

"Thet's the answer," he said, with a mirthless smile of satisfaction, closing the book and slipping it back in the saddle pocket. "Kenton is even slicker than I was givin' him credit fer bein'."

A slight noise in the brush behind him caused the Kid to whirl suddenly in his saddle. His swift glance caught the dull flash of morning sunlight on a blued-steel gun barrel.

Bra-ang! Bang! Bang! The canyon echoed to the roar of six-guns.

Wheeling Speed, the Kid started toward the spot where Whitey's body had dropped from sight in the thick undergrowth. His smoking .45 was still in his hand. But before he had gone a dozen yards, the sound of a horse crashing through the chaparral came to his ears.

"It's thet ornery Tug, high-tail-

in' it over here to get in on the killin'," the Kid told himself.

He reined up the buckskin and waited.

Seconds passed, and then suddenly a dun cow pony burst into the small clearing where brush had been cut to build the canyon fence. Its rider, the hombre called "Tug," jerked his mount to a sliding stop. A look of astonishment flitted over his brutish face. Then, with an oath, he went for his .45.

The Kid's gun flashed up and rocketed its death charge.

"Them two hombres sure aimed to live up to the K Bar outfit's reputation as killers," grimly muttered the young cow dick, plucking a couple of brass-jacketed cartridges from his belt and reloading his Colt.

Shortly after midday, "Scar" Halsey rode in to the K Bar ranch house to meet his boss. Cougar Kenton would have some special orders to give regarding the handling of the beef herd, when he returned from the railroad shipping point. And Halsey had news for the boss which he judged it best to tell at the earliest possible moment.

The scar-faced foreman was hot and ill-tempered. After eating his fill, he swore at the cook and strode out of the house, just as Kenton came riding up.

The owner of the K Bar was a tall, muscular, harsh-featured man of around forty. His eyes were cold and hard as agate, his shaven lips thin and cruel.

"What's new, Scar?" he asked in a peculiarly flat, toneless voice, as he swung down from his sweating horse beside the foreman.

"Plenty," said the burly foreman. "A hawk-faced young jasper come ridin' up here this mornin' an' claimed he's a rep fer Old Man Terrill. He's a right salty kid. Riled me so thet I'd 'a' plugged him, if I hadn't figured mebbe yuh'd want tuh look him over first."

"Did yuh send him out on circle?" asked Kenton.

"Yeah, I sent him along with Tug an' Whitey. I give 'em the wink, an' they'll see thet he don't know no more when he comes back than he did afore he started."

"How do yuh figure Terrill sendin' a rep over here? Has Bullet Harper got back?" the K Bar boss demanded sharply.

"Bullet ain't showed up, an' it's got me worried," said the foreman. "Do yuh reckon he slipped up?"

"It ain't likely. Bullet's careful. He don't aim tuh give the other fella no chance."

Cougar Kenton started to roll a cigarette. His shifting eyes noted a little bunch of cattle topping a low rise a short distance to the north of the ranch house.

"What's the idea of havin' them cows hazed down here tuh the house?" Kenton demanded angrily.

Scar Halsey started as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Why, dog-gone! Thet's the kid rep bringin' 'em in," he said in amazement. "I know thet big buckskin geldin' he's forkin'."

"Yuh know so danged much, mebbe yuh kin tell what he's packin' in on them two horses he's leadin'," snapped Kenton.

"I kin make a right close guess," said the foreman with a bitter oath. "He's done——"

"Yuh let me handle him," cut in Kenton savagely. "I want tuh find out what he knows."

"There's only one thing tuh do with thet young jasper—beef him afore he gits a chanct tuh talk tuh anybody 'ceptin' ourselves."

"We'll do thet, too," agreed Ken-

ton, "soon as I git done talkin' tuh him."

The Kid left his little herd of beef steers down by the corrals and came riding up to the ranch house, when he caught sight of the two men on the porch. He was still leading the two cow ponies with their slicker-covered burdens, when he reined up in front of Kenton and his surly foreman.

"Howdy!" called the Kid, looking keenly at the K Bar owner. "You happen to be Kenton?"

"Thet's my name," said the tall cowman bitingly. "An' now thet you know me, mebbe I could find out how come yuh to haze them cow critters down here. An' what's the meanin' of leadin' them circle hosses up here with packs on?"

"Thet's easy to answer," coolly replied the Kid. "Them's Slash T cows. I run acrost 'em cached in a box canyon where your rannies had hid 'em. Then these here hombres yuh call Tug and Whitey, tried to drill me when they found out what I'd discovered, and I had to put 'em away."

"An' yuh expect us tuh believe thet yarn?" snarled Cougar Kenton. "Yuh must have hid in the brush an' dry-gulched both them boys. They was fast on the draw an' dead shots. Yuh couldn't have downed them in a fair fight.

"An' another thing," went on Kenton. "Yuh cain't prove nothin' on me nor any of my waddies in connection with tryin' tuh rustle Slash T cows. What could I do with 'em? There ain't no way of makin' a K Bar outa a Slash T brand."

"Does sound kind of onreasonable," said the Kid coolly, although his veins were tingling, as they always did when he was heading into danger, and his dark eyes gleamed. "But, you see, I looked in the brand book of the adjoinin' State, and I found out you own a Slash T brand over there.

"All you got to do with Old Man Terrill's cows is drive 'em about twenty miles to the State line and throw 'em on your leased range. Then you can ship 'em as your own, and nobody suspicions anything."

"Yuh ain't no kid rep! Yo're a snoopin' cow dick!" suddenly bellowed Scar Halsey, wild with rage.

"Git him!" snarled Cougar Kenton.

Both of the murderous killers on the porch of the ranch house went for their guns with the darting swiftness of a rattler's strike.

But the Kid's draw was not to be beaten. As if magically plucked from thin air, his long-barreled .45 was in his hand.

It roared and blazed in a fierce blast that dropped Scar Halsey in his tracks.

Cougar Kenton had a split second more time. His gun flamed once, as his knees buckled and he pitched headlong off the low porch.

"Dead Man's Range!" muttered the grim-faced, fighting Kid, fingering a bullet hole that had suddenly appeared in the high-peaked crown of his dusty Stetson. "Mebbe now it'll have a chance to git peaceful ag'in."

Reining his buckskin back toward the Slash T cattle, the young range dick began whistling the doleful "Cowboy's Lament." It was a dirge for the killers of the K Bar.

Thet same tune, whistled by the same range dick, has been the dirge fer a whole flock o' plumb tough hombres—an' it will keep right on bein' the same, jest as long as there's rustlers on the cattle ranges of the West. The Whistlin' Kid's got a habit o' windin' up complete every case he takes on. Watch fer the next story about him. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right soon.

The Matchless Waddy From Bar 10

By Andrew A. Griffin

Author of "Johnny Forty-five and the Brand Blotters," etc.

THE old Concord stage came to a grinding halt in front of the Lazy Creek House. Its leathery-faced old driver, "Big Jake" Ennis, wrapped his long lines around the brake handle and glared at the loafers on the dingy hotel's wide porch.

"Hey, yuh dang, shiftless, good-fer-nothin' sand fleas!" he bellowed. "Rattle yore hocks offn them chairs an' len' me a han' here. I got a sick passenger fer yore two-bit town."

The loafers laughed, but not one of them moved.

"What yuh tellin' us fer?" a big, hulking jasper asked finally. "We ain't no reception committee."

Big Jake swore feelingly. Then, grunting mightily, he climbed down from the box and clumped stiffly toward the door of the stage. He might have known that no Lazy Creek citizen would stir his stumps out of the shade to help an hombre. They were all——

"I'll help yuh, Jake," said a voice at the grizzled driver's shoulder. "What's the matter, nohow?"

Ennis swung around. A battered-looking young cow-puncher stood grinning at him, the end of a match just showing between his strong white teeth.

Big Jake recognized the cowboy. Everybody in that part of the

Southwest knew the chunky, blue-eyed little cow nurse. His clothes looked as if they'd come West in the gold rush of '49 and been worn steadily ever since, and his round, freckled, good-natured face was strangely incomplete without the end of a match showing between his lips.

His name—because he was always chewing up all his own matches and asking anybody within reach for more—was "Matchless"—Matchless McGuire. Whatever other name he might once have owned had been lost long ago.

In spite of his ragged clothes, innocent, wide-eyed expression, short stature, and youth, he was top rider for the big Bar 10 cattle spread, down south a way. And bad men who knew him never crowded him in a ruckus. Those who, not knowing him, did a bit of crowding seldom survived long enough to try again.

The stage driver heaved a sigh of relief. If Matchless McGuire was taking a hand, he might just as well start his team out of Lazy Creek. The ragged kid always finished what he started, and besides, he had a sort of interest in the passenger's business.

"I got a sick kid in hyar, Matchless," Big Jake drawled. "I dunno, but it looks like inflooenzy or somethin'. He allows as how he's a nevvy of a pard o' yores—English Jack Belden, owner o' the J B."

Matchless McGuire pushed his wide-brimmed Stetson, from which the peak of the crown had long since disappeared, back on his mouse-colored hair. He bit off the last eighth of an inch of the match stick between his teeth and spat out the remains.

"Got a match, Jake?" he asked, holding out a stubby-fingered hand. "Yuh say he's a nevvy of English Jack's? Too bad he's sick. I was jest figurin' on ridin' out ter see the ol' cuss, an' he could 'a' gone with me."

Big Jake muttered a good-natured oath. Reaching into a pocket, he pulled out a handful of matches and handed them to young McGuire. The cowpoke took them, popped one into his mouth.

Inside the stage, lying stretched out on one of the leather seats, was a white-faced boy of about thirteen—the only passenger in the stage. He looked at Matchless with wide eyes, tried to get up, but couldn't make it. There was no doubt that he was plenty sick.

The chunky Bar 10 top hand lifted the boy out bodily and carried him up the porch steps and into the Lazy Creek House. In the lobby, he deposited him on a low couch and turned to a loafer who had followed him in.

"Git Doc Parsons!" he snapped. "Pronto!"

For a moment, the man hesitated. Then, as he caught the gleam in Matchless's blue eyes, he turned and high-tailed it out of the door. McGuire grinned and turned to the kid.

"Are—are you a *real* cowboy, mister?" the boy asked weakly, staring in admiration at Matchless's wide, greasy bullhide chaps, low-hung six-gun, and cartridge belt.

"I've often wondered 'bout thet myself, son," Matchless chuckled. "I'm s'posed ter be, I reckon. But tell me about yoreself. What's yore name? Where yuh from? Does yore uncle know yo're comin'?"

"No," said the boy, his eyes still as big as a calf's.

"Huh?" grunted Matchless, biting into a fresh match.

"I mean, no, he don't know I'm comin'," said the kid. "That is, he does know I am, but not when. His

name is John Belden. He's my mother's brother. I'm Bud Jenkins. My mom 'n' pop died. So uncle John told me to come live with him. I lived in Philadelphia. But I like this town better. Do you know Uncle John?"

The bow-legged Bar 10 waddy laughed. Once the kid got started, he thought, his words just stampeded loose. He was a likable younker, too. Now that he thought about it, Matchless remembered hearing "English Jack" say something about a young nephew back East.

He nodded. "Shore, I know English Jack—thet's what we call yore uncle. John Belden's his real name, ain't it? We don't know him so well by his hull handle. English Jack's enough, out here."

Doc Parsons arrived just then. Waving Matchless aside, he bent over the boy on the couch. He prodded and poked, listened and had Bud say "Ah!" At last he straightened up, smiling.

"Nothing to be worried about," he snapped in the voice doctors use to make people feel better. "Just a touch of grippe. He'll be all right with a few days' or a week's rest. Food and rest—that's all he needs."

"Can I go see my uncle to-morrow?" demanded Bud. "I told him I'd come out, just as soon as I got to Lazy Creek. That's a funny name, ain't it—Lazy Creek?"

"Gosh, no, kid!" said Matchless. "It's twenty-thirty miles out ter yore uncle's. But I tell yuh what; I was goin' out there, anyhow, terday or ter-morrer. So I'll tell him yo're here an' bring him in after yuh, pronto. By thet time, he'll be able ter take yuh home in a wagon, I reckon."

"Gee! Thanks, Mr. Cowboy. I—I wish I could go with you, though."

Matchless chuckled. "My handle's Matchless, son. I'll git yuh a room here in the hotel. It won't be no good, an' the food'll be wuss, but I reckon yuh'll keep. Got any money?"

"Ten dollars," said Bud, with as much pride as if he'd said a hundred.

The Bar 10 waddy's face became serious. So the kid was broke, too, was he? He shore was a game one, though. Not a whimper out of him.

Matchless engaged a room for Bud and paid for it himself. Then, with a final word of cheer to the boy, and a threat of sudden and unpleasant death to the hotel owner if he didn't take care of the kid's every need, he hit the trail for the J B—English Jack's small foothills ranch.

The little cowpoke looked like the worst kind of saddle tramp, as he pounded along. His ragged clothes fluttered in the breeze. Everything in his outfit looked scrubby—everything but his tied-down Colt, that is. The weapon was polished, shining, well cared for.

He chewed matches as he traveled, grinding the wooden sticks to pulp between his strong teeth and expertly spitting the pieces between his bronc's ears. He was happy, for he was riding to take good news to an old friend.

Matchless had known English Jack Belden for a long time. The rancher had punched cows for the Bar 10 and had taught young McGuire how to ride and shoot and dab his loop over wabbly-legged calves.

Every time he got a chance now, Matchless rode out to see the old puncher. A very real bond of affection existed between the two. The rancher was the nearest thing to a father Matchless had ever known, his own having died before Matchless had been born.

He was a queer old duck—always reading all kinds of big books. Some thick-headed range riders thought him locoed on that account; but not Matchless. He liked to hear English Jack read from those books, some of which he had sent East for, but most of which he had inherited from his father in England—many years before.

Matchless camped for the night about fifteen miles out from Lazy Creek. He could have pushed on, but he was not in that much of a hurry. Bud Jenkins couldn't leave town for a week, anyway.

He turned in early and was up at the first faint streaks of dawn. By the time he had eaten breakfast, his match supply was exhausted.

"Dang it!" he muttered. "Don't that beat all? Oh, waal, Jack'll have plenty of 'em."

Swinging aboard his shaggy little sorrel, he started out. There was a grin lurking at the corners of his wide mouth; his blue eyes danced. Now and again, he broke into loud, if tuneless, song.

Soon he topped a low rise in the sagebrush plain. Below that rise, on the other side, was the J B. In a moment, he was within sight of the wide, well-watered valley.

He stared down at it and yanked the sorrel to a sudden halt. His jaw sagged in unbelief; his blue eyes fairly popped in surprise. He caught his breath in a gasp.

For spread out over the floor of the J B valley, where English Jack's cattle should have been grazing, was a huge flock of dirty-white, woolly sheep!

II.

For a long, breathless moment, Matchless McGuire sat there on the rim of the valley, staring at those distant woollies. All the disgust and hatred that a range-bred cowman feels for sheep was mirrored in the depths of his wide-set eyes and showed in the rigid set of his stubborn jaw.

"Sheep!" he growled. And again: "Sheep! Teetotally dang my eyes! I jest cain't believe thet Jack's turned sheep-herder. No, sir, I cain't——"

He broke off, reaching in his pocket for a match. It would help him to think, and this situation needed all the thinking he could give it.

Suddenly he snarled in anger. As usual, he had chewed up all his matches; the match pocket was empty.

"Teetotally dang it all!" he muttered. "If this ain't a mess, I don't know! But, by blazes, I'm goin' ter find out about things right pronto!"

There was a spiral of blue wood smoke coming from the stovepipe chimney of the cabin right at the foot of the hill on which he stood. It was English Jack's cabin, and the smoke showed that the rancher was inside, probably getting his breakfast.

The Bar 10 top hand jammed in his spurs. The shaggy little sorrel snapped into action, leaping high in the air, and coming down headed for the cabin. Belly to the ground and tail streaming, it raced down the slope.

But as he tore along, a grin slowly replaced the scowl on Matchless's freckled face. After all, Jack was getting old, and sheep were a whole lot easier to raise and care for than steers. An hombre couldn't blame Jack for——"

The grin gave way to the scowl again. English Jack was a cowman. Old or young, he had no business switching to sheep. It was worse than selling his saddle.

"No, by jiminy!" Matchless gritted. "An' I cain't believe he has, neither. Somethin's rotten here, I figure. Teetotally dang it! I wish I had a match!"

On, on he raced until he was within a hundred yards of the cabin—a small, one-room affair made of piñon logs and scrap lumber. It was right below him now. Matchless McGuire's grin came back. He drew his Colt, threw in his spurs.

"Yipee! Eeyow!" he whooped, as he thundered down on the shack, slamming four slugs from his .45 over the roof. "Come out o' there, yuh danged sheep-herder! Come out, I say, afore I smoke yuh out! What yuh mean——"

Crack! Zzee! A rifle, poked suddenly through the glassless window of the shack, barked sharply. The bullet sang past Matchless's ear.

The sorrel reared back on its haunches in a sliding stop. Swift as a pouncing puma, Matchless leaped from the saddle. He crouched, gun in hand, a bewildered, hurt expression on his boyish face.

Crack! The rifle spoke again.

There was the dull clank of metal striking metal. Matchless felt as if a mule had kicked his gun arm. His Colt went spinning through the air, falling several yards away.

Instantly the Bar 10 waddy's arms went up. There was something wrong here—some mistake. And he didn't intend to get salivated until he had found out about it. With face so pale that the freckles stood out like mud blobs on a white shirt, he started slowly forward.

"Yuh danged, good-fer-nothin' ol' maverick!" he yelled. "What in blazes is the matter with yuh, nohow? It's me, Matchless McGuire, yuh danged idiot! Have yuh lost yore eyesight as well as yore bra——"

He stopped yelling so suddenly that he almost bit off the end of his tongue. The door of the shack had opened, and a man had stepped out—an hombre who looked about as much like English Jack as a sheep looks like a dogie.

He carried a Colt six-gun in his hand, a horny thumb holding back the hammer.

"Wh-who the blazes are you?" the bow-legged little puncher demanded. "What yuh mean, shootin' at me like yuh done? Where's English Jack?"

The stranger—a tall, thin, loose-jointed jasper with long yellow hair and the fishy green eyes of a born killer—curled back his lips in a mirthless grin.

"I'm askin' yuh the same thing, hombre," he snarled. "What yuh mean, comin' foggin' down on me like yuh done, yellin' an' shootin' like a blasted 'Pache? Who are yuh, an' what yuh want in my valley?"

"*Yore* valley?" Matchless almost choked in surprise and anger. "What the Sam Hill are yuh talkin' about? This here valley belongs ter my friend, English Jack Belden. Where is he?"

The green-eyed stranger's face was as expressionless as a sheep's. He kept his six-gun trained on Matchless, his thumb still holding back the hammer.

"If yuh mean the ol' geezer what used ter own this spread," he drawled, "I dunno. He pulled out two-three weeks ago. Dunno where he went."

Matchless stared at the stranger in pop-eyed surprise. "Pulled out!" he gasped. "What yuh mean? What——"

"I mean he pulled out, vamosed, beat it, drifted, sloped. Sold out ter me, packed his war bag, an' lit a shuck on an ol' dun mule. I ain't seen 'im since—an' don't want ter."

"Sold out? English Jack—don't know—— Say, stranger, fer the love o' Mike, have yuh got a match?" The freckle-faced waddy held out a hand toward the green-eyed gunman.

The latter started at the strange request. He looked down at Matchless as if the young puncher might be some critter that had been chewing locoweed.

Then he grinned, holstered his gun, and fished out a match. Evidently he didn't consider young McGuire dangerous enough to keep covered.

"Here," he said, holding out the match.

Matchless took it and popped it into his mouth. Biting off a good half inch, he spat it out, replaced the rest, and heaved a sigh of relief. Now he'd be able to think this thing out.

Swiftly he told the green-eyed stranger who he was and why he'd come charging down on the cabin as he had. In exchange, he found out that the stranger's name was Hank Wade, that he owned the sheep which now grazed in the valley, and that he possessed a quitclaim deed on the property.

"Do—do yuh mind if I take a squint at it?" Matchless asked. "Not thet I mistrust yuh, Wade, but somehow, I jest cain't git used ter the idea o' Jack leavin' the way he did. Nobody in town said they'd seen him lately. An' he shore would 'a' gone there. His nevvy——"

The cowpoke broke off. Bud Jenkins! He'd almost forgotten the kid. If English Jack didn't show up, what would become of him? He was broke, and had no other folks to go to.

"Shore," Wade said. "I'll show it ter yuh, seein' yo're a friend o' the ol' coot's. Leave yore artillery lay an' come in the roost. I'll show it ter yuh there."

Matchless frowned. He didn't like the sound of that. Also, he had half expected Wade to refuse to produce the quitclaim deed. He had a strong hunch that something was rotten in the J B valley.

But he followed Wade into the house. One look around almost convinced him that Wade was telling the truth. When Jack had owned it, the cabin had always been neatly cared for. Now it looked as if some coyotes had used it for a den.

Dirty dishes littered the single table. Refuse covered the plank floor. The bunk was a mess of greasy-looking blankets. Matchless's stubby nose wrinkled up. The whole place smelled of sheep.

Wade dropped to his kness beside the bunk. He fished around beneath it for a moment, then pulled out a black tin box. He opened it and drew out a piece of printed paper.

"Here," he said, his green eyes glittering with a queer, triumphant light. "Squint yore peepers at thet. Is it O. K.?"

Matchless squinted. The paper was a quitclaim, all right. And it seemed legal enough, too. In fact, the cowpoke could barely make out what it was about, with all its whereases and wherefores, parties of the first and second parts, and other legal phrases.

"It shore must be O. K.," he thought. "An' there it says 'Quitclaim Deed' right at the top. Let's look at the way it's signed."

Two names were affixed on two dotted lines at the bottom of the printed form. "One was "John S. Belden"—neat and precise. The other name was "Henry J. Wade."

It was news to Matchless that English Jack possessed a middle initial. As far as he knew, he had never seen

the old rancher's full signature before.

He looked around him, still having a strong hunch that something was wrong, if he could only put his finger on it. His eyes fell on the bookshelves where English Jack had once kept his books. One tattered volume still remained. The rest had gone with Jack.

Matchless quickly drew out the book and glanced at the title.

"The Plays of William Shakespeare," he read aloud from the cover. "Whew! No wonder Jack left it behind. Now let's see."

He flipped open the book to the flyleaf. There was the name, "John S. Belden." Matchless looked at it and then at the name on the legal paper. They were identical. Even his inexperienced eyes could see that.

"That settles that," he muttered, and put the book back on the shelf. "Everything looks O. K., Wade," he continued aloud. "Got another match?"

His hunch still held, but——

"Here, blast yuh!" Wade snarled, holding out two more matches. "Take 'em. An' if there ain't nothin' more yuh want round here, git out—an' stay out! I don't want no truck with cowpokes. This here's sheep country from now on out."

III.

Matchless had been looking at the rickety old iron stove, held together with wires, and the rusty old five-gallon kerosene can that stood on a low stool not far from it. The stove was filled with the glowing coals of a fire.

At Hank Wade's words, however, Matchless spun around, bristling with a cowman's rage at the word "sheep."

"Oh, yeah?" he snapped. "Don't be too dawg-goned shore o' thet. I'm gittin' now, but if I don't find no sign of English Jack, I'll be in ag'in ter see yuh. I got a hunch yo're crooked, Wade. If I find out yuh are, I'll——"

For a moment, Matchelss had forgotten that he was unarmed. That oversight almost proved fatal. For, with a snarling oath, green eyes glittering, Hank Wade dug for iron.

Matchless flung himself aside, just as the sheepman's Colt cut loose. The slug grazed his shoulder, and Matchless hit the floor. Something crashed down beside him.

It was a heavy old Sharps buffalo gun that had been standing in a corner. Matchless recognized it as belonging to English Jack. Without thinking whether it was loaded or not, he swung it up on Wade.

"Freeze, yuh skunk!" he barked. "Drop thet six or I'll turn this cannon loose!"

Evidently Wade either knew the Sharps was loaded, or else, like Matchless, he was in doubt. At any rate, he turned pale as he stared down the cavernous maw of the fearsome old weapon. His Colt clattered to the floor. Matchless scrambled to his feet.

Covering Wade with the Sharps, he made the sheepman back up to the far wall of the shack. Then he stooped quickly and picked up the fallen Colt.

"Now, dang yuh!" he snapped. "I don't know what call yuh had ter make thet play. An' if I was yore kind, I'd plug yuh now an' ask questions afterward. But I ain't yore kind. So I'm driftin'."

He stepped to the table and pulled open a drawer. In it he found several big cartridges for the Sharps. He pocketed them.

"Jack told me onct thet I could

have this gun," he said, indicating the Sharps. "I'm takin' it now—an' yore Colt. Yuh'll find mine—jest like yores—out in the grass somewheres."

He backed toward the door, covering Wade with the .45. Wade was mouthing oaths and fairly trembling with rage. Suddenly the cowboy's eyes fell on the sheepman's Winchester, standing near the window beside the door.

He stepped over to it and deftly levered out its cartridges. Then, picking them up, he put them in his pocket. Returning to the door, he tucked the Sharps under his arm and went out.

His bronc was standing a few yards away. With his blue eyes snapping and the match in his mouth wabbling up and down from the force of his teeth chewing on its inner end, he swung aboard.

Back up the slope he headed the sorrel. His mind was racing. Something, he knew now, was rotten here in the J B valley. But what was it? He had no proof—only a dim hunch that Wade was a wily crook. He ought to have plugged him.

"Teetotally dang it!" he muttered. "I bet he killed English Jack. Thet quitclaimer looks O. K., but I bet thet——"

Crack! Zzee! A rifle spoke behind him, and his battered, topless hat leaped from his head and spun to earth, as the bullet ripped through it.

Startled, Matchless jumped in the saddle, accidentally throwing in his spurs. The sorrel squealed in terror, arched its back and bucked.

Taken by surprise and burdened by the twenty-pound buffalo gun, Matchless broke the code of the bronc-twister and grabbed fast for leather. But he was too late. The next he knew, he was sailing through the air, and the ground was coming up to meet him with sickening speed.

Thud! He landed in a heap, sprawled out, breathless.

Crack-crack! From the cabin window down the slope, Wade's murderous rifle blazed. Dirt sprayed the Bar 10 waddy's face, brought him back his senses.

Fortunately, he saw at once, he had fallen behind a small clump of sage. It wasn't much cover, but Wade couldn't see him very well through it, and if he lay perfectly still, the sheepman might think him dead.

But Matchless didn't want to lie still—not by a long shot. Wade had opened the ball. War was declared. Something had to be done—but what?

Slowly, cautiously, he parted the sage clump and peered down at the cabin. Wade crouched in the window, watching the sage clump. At Matchless's first movement, the sheepman let drive with the Winchester.

Matchless ducked down, holding his breath as a hail of jacketed bullets ripped into the ground about him. Luckily he was above the cabin. Shooting uphill was difficult; and Wade, having apparently found a new supply of shells for the Winchester, was not very good with a long gun.

"Teetotally dang it all!" Matchless growled. "If this ain't a mess! I got it comin' ter me, though, fer bein' danged careless an' not rememberin' Wade's a skunk. But how the blazes am I goin' ter git out of it? One o' them slugs o' his'll wing me shore, in a minute. An' me out o' six-gun range!"

He looked around him. The old Sharps lay beside him where it had fallen when he was bucked off the sorrel. With tingling nerves, the

chunky waddy drew it slowly toward him, careful not to let any waving of the grass betray the movement.

An inch at a time, then, he shoved the long, heavy barrel through his scanty cover, until he could look over the low sights at the cabin window. A good half of the interior of the shack was visible from his position—the stove, oil can, bunk, and a corner of the center table.

Br-room! The Sharps roared out notice to Wade that the cowboy was far from dead.

Matchless grinned coldly as he saw the eighth-of-a-pound leaden slug rip splinters from the window sill. He imagined he could hear Hank Wade's gasp of terror and surprise.

But the Sharps was a single-shot weapon. While Matchless searched for another cartridge, Wade cut loose again. This time, a bullet raked Matchless's arm from wrist to elbow. The little waddy gasped and bit his lip in pain. His blue eyes glittered dangerously.

Then he groaned. In his fall, some of the Sharps shells had dropped from his pocket. There were only three left.

"I shore got ter make 'em count, or my goose is plumb cooked, stuffed, and ready ter eat," muttered Matchless, gritting his teeth.

Cautiously he looked down the Sharps barrel. Wade now was out of sight, waiting for Matchless to unload the Sharps again and give him a chance to shoot. The Bar 10 waddy laughed suddenly, harshly.

"Blast thet hombre!" he growled. "Here's where I start somethin'! I got ter shoot straight. I jest got ter! If I miss——"

For a long moment, he held his breath as he sighted the heavy weapon. Shooting downhill was even harder than shooting up. His target was large, but it had to be hit just right—and he had only three shells.

Br-room! With a roar like a field piece, the buffalo gun threw its screeching chunk of hot lead down the hill.

Phl-lup! A dull, metallic thud came from the cabin; then a yell from Wade.

Bang-ang! Bang-bang! The Winchester stuttered back a leaden answer to the Sharps.

Matchless moaned as a bullet zipped through his upper arm. The world seemed to spin around before his eyes. But he gritted his teeth and slammed another shell into the hot breach of the Sharps.

He had scored his first hit. The last big slug had torn into that oil can near the stove, the force of the impact tearing the can's seams apart and blowing its entire contents out over the cabin floor in a regular explosion.

Now he had another close one to place. After that, he could rest a minute—maybe. Shaking himself, he brought the rifle into line again, waited, then gently squeezed the trigger.

"Dang!" he croaked. "Missed! An' I only got one more chanct."

Quickly he shoved in his last shell, paying no attention to the snapping whine of Wade's bullets as they rained around him. Then he raised his head, pressed his freckled cheek against the Sharps stock.

Boom! Clang! Crash! He'd done it that time—put a heavy slug right against that rickety old stove.

The noise told him that the result had been what he'd expected—the stove had broken apart.

Part of the noise came from Hank Wade. The sheep-herder was yelling like a madman, far too excited to

return that last shot. For the stove, breaking apart, had dropped a heap of glowing coals on the pool of oil that had collected from the burst oil can.

Matchless chuckled and lay back to rest. One man could not stop that fire from destroying the cabin. Water would make it even worse—spreading the flames.

"It won't be long now," he muttered, and drew his Colt.

IV.

And, indeed, it wasn't long. Soon Hank Wade was shouting to Matchless, in profane pleading, to let him surrender. Smoke billowed from the shack.

"All right, yuh skunk!" Matchless yelled. "Come on out—with yore hands up, an' yore rifle missin'. Head up the hill toward me. Remember, I still got this ol' Sharps! An' a heck of a lot o' good *thet* does me," he added, under his breath.

The door of the cabin opened, and Wade rushed out. Matchless could see that the interior was now a mass of flames. The wood had been dried by long years in the half-desert climate, and had caught fire rapidly with the help of the spilled kerosene.

With hands held high above his head, his horse face white with terror, Hank Wade rushed toward Matchless. When he was close enough, the little waddy stood up, dropped the empty Sharps, and covered him with the Colt. He pulled a pigging string from his hip pocket with his free hand.

"Put down yore paws an' stick 'em out!" he snapped. "I'm hog-tyin' yuh, yuh murderin' skunk!"

The task was soon accomplished. Wade swore and mouthed vicious threats. But Matchless kept a grim silence.

"What yuh think yo're doin'?" the sheepman asked. "What yuh goin' ter do with me?"

"Take yuh in ter the sheriff fer murder. Yuh killed English Jack an' stole his ranch!"

"Yuh lie! Yuh ain't got no proof o' thet. An' I got a quitclaim deed, signed by the ol' geezer himself, right here in my pocket."

Matchless was silent. He knew the truth of Wade's statement. He didn't have any proof. Of course, he could have the sheepman arrested for the attack on him, but now that the fight was over, Matchless didn't want to do that.

"But he *must* 'a' killed Jack," the little puncher thought. "Got any matches on yuh, hombre?" he asked aloud. He needed one badly.

Wade snarled. Matchless roughly searched him, but found nothing except the quitclaim deed. He put that in his back pocket.

Then he looked down at the Sharps. A sudden smile lighted up his freckled face, and he pounced on the gun. English Jack had once said that he always carried a supply of matches in the hollowed center of his gunstock. There should be some in the Sharps now. Matchless set to work.

His pocketknife soon unscrewed the butt plate. He upended the rifle and looked inside. A wad of paper held in a whole handful of wooden matches. The waddy grinned.

Just as he was about to throw that wad of paper away, however, something about it caught his eyes. He stopped the movement and unfolded the paper.

Then Matchless McGuire's eyes popped. He let loose a whoop of mingled surprise, joy, and rage. He danced around on the ground, waving the paper under Hank Wade's long nose.

"Are yuh locoed," snarled the sheepman, "or what?"

"Neither," yelled Matchless, "but yo're catched! Listen ter this—it's a note from English Jack ter me. Here's what it says:

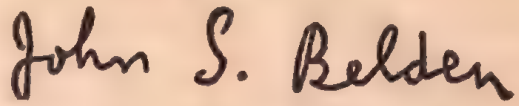
"I'm being besieged in the shack. A sheep-herder, Matchless. Get him and see that my nephew, Bud Jenkins, gets the JB. Help him run it. I can't last. No water. And winged. I know you'll get this note, if you ever get this gun. You'll be needing matches. So long, kid.

"Your friend,
ENGLISH JACK.
JOHN A. BELDEN."

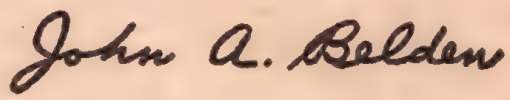
"Thet don't prove I done it," snarled Wade, his face paler than ever. "He don't name me."

"Don't it?" shouted Matchless. "Take a look at his real signature he's put onter it. It ain't no more like the one on yore quitclaim than mine is. It ain't even got the same middle initial. Take a look!"

Wade looked and groaned. For Matchless was right. The signature on the deed was like this:



The one on the note from the Sharps was:



"Blast yuh!" Wade swore. "Yuh got me! I copied thet signature from the book yuh saw in the shack, after I'd buried the ol' coot out behind the house an' burned all his stuff."

"The book!" Matchless roared with laughter. "I jest remember—he got most of them books from his pa. Yuh must 'a' copied his ol' man's name. An' he's been dead fifty-sixty years, I reckon."

BRIDLE BIT

A LOST CREEK OF TEXAS

WILD HORSE CREEK, in extreme west Texas, is said to be the only stream in the Southwest whose waters enter neither the Gulf of Mexico nor the Pacific Ocean. This stream has its beginning near Marfa. It winds about one hundred miles in a northwesterly direction, and then disappears in the desert, leaving absolutely no further trace of itself.

At various times, men have made efforts to verify a theory that it continues its course as an underground river, but they have been unable to prove it. They have surveyed and they have dug, but without success. Men of science have been called upon to help solve the problem, but they too have failed.

During the rainy seasons Wild Horse Creek is a good-sized river. Even during dry spells, it often contains water to a depth of several feet. It flows into a lake, that also comes and goes in a mysterious fashion.

This lake only exists during heavy rainfalls. After the rain stops, the lake gradually gets lower and lower, until it vanishes altogether.

Some say that both the creek and the lake disappear through evaporation, due to the hot, dry climate, but no one has been able to prove this either. They come and they go, and that is all there is to it.

Another peculiarity about Wild Horse Creek is that it runs in a northwesterly direction. It is said that it is the only stream south of the Mason and Dixon line to do so.

Boss of the Shoe String

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Long Loop of the Thunderer," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SNAKE EYES.

PURPLE lights and shadows, cast by the late-afternoon sun, lay over the Sacramento Mountains as the four riders loped from the Big Bench into the little cow town.

The foremost—a well-built, almost handsome young buckaroo, atop a chestnut stallion—drew his mount down to a walk as he took in the vivid coloring about him. The other three did likewise.

The first to speak was a homely, pop-eyed waddy with a crooked nose above a long and grizzled mustache. His words were rather to himself than to his pards, however.

Slowly, painfully, he was spelling out the name of the town, as indicated on the little yellow station house perched forlornly by itself on the squalid outskirts.

"M-A-N-A-N-A! Man Anna!" he pronounced in puzzlement. "Waal, I'll be a horned toad if I ever heerd tell of a name like thet! What the heck does it mean, Billy?"

Billy West, the leader, smiled amusedly. "I'm afraid yore education in Spanish has been a little neglected, Buck," he replied, gray eyes twinkling. "The word is pronounced 'Mon-yannah.' It means——"

"Mistlee Buck, him plenty dumb not to know lat, so be."

The chuckling interruption came from a third member of the group—an almond-eyed, yellow-faced little Chinaman upon a sleepy piebald.

"Buck" Foster, the veteran, glared. A fourth rider had burst forth into a bray of laughter.

"Haw-haw-haw!" this waddy roared—a tall, good-natured young hombre whose bright-red hair glistened as the sun's rays fell upon it. "Sing Lo's right. If Buck hadn't been plenty dumb, he'd heard thet Hemsley feller give the town's name, when he told Billy whar to find thet thar Jake Gleason what wants ter sell them cattle."

Buck Foster sputtered in immediate anger. He and Joe Scott, the redhead, were always on the outs. With a furious yank at his mustache, Buck snapped hotly:

"Say-y, I was payin' attention ter more important things. Thet Hemsley jasper didn't look any too good ter me. His trigger finger got awful nervous when Billy questioned him about them cattle."

Billy West nodded assent. "Righto, Buck. There's somethin' queer about this deal—Gleason huntin' a sale for a herd he hasn't even bought yet. Thet's what got me interested. We'll just look up thet Gleason bird at his saloon, I reckon."

Montanans all—and thus strangers to this mountainous section of New Mexico—the little party jogged on at careless ease into Mañana. Buck's fierce brown eyes kept darting about. He was still trying to figure out why the town bore the name he thought so queer and outlandish.

"Say, Billy, yuh never did tell me what this hyar Man Anna means," he growled, sticking doggedly to his own pronunciation. "Yuh got interrupted by a pair o' nitwits."

Joe Scott winked at Sing Lo, the chink. Buck was continually on the peck, and these two loved to rile him.

Billy West answered seriously enough, though. "Mañana, Buck, is the Spanish word for 'to-morrow.' These easy-goin' Mex down here are 'to-morrow's children.' With them, nothin' is ever so important thet it can't be put off till another day, old-timer."

Joe laughed again. "Reckon somebody shore thought they was playin' a joke on this burg when they named it 'To-morrow,' huh?"

"Help me, Hannah! From the looks o' this place, to-morrow's never got hyar yit," guffawed the battle-scarred Buck Foster.

By this time, the Montanans were well down the one wide street of the little cow town. On either side, they saw long rows of squat dobe huts, flat of top, many straw-colored, and apparently housing numerous families. Children, in large numbers, played about the dusty, barren dooryards.

The scene was quiet, peaceful. Mañana seemed to doze—outwardly, at least. Joe Scott, glancing about, suddenly exclaimed to Billy:

"Look, boss! Thar's thet Cactus Saloon, whar Hemsley said we'd find Jake Gleason."

A short distance ahead, a sign, on which was crudely painted a big clump of prickly pear, bore the faded words:

Cactus Club—Liquors, Dancing, Gambling.

As they entered the crowded, smoke-filled room, an unusual tenseness seemed to hang over the place. No one appeared to notice the newcomers. Everybody's attention was centered upon a crap table at the far end of the barroom.

Billy quickly strode up to the fat, dirty-aproned bartender.

"Where'll I find Gleason?" he asked.

A jab of a stubby finger toward the table in the rear was the drink dispenser's only answer.

As Billy turned toward the game, a voice, pitched a bit high by either excitement or alcohol, was proclaiming:

"I'm lettin' her ride, men! Shootin' the works! Four hundred dollars, just as she lays! Who wants her?"

"Go on, Sinton; yore money's covered! Roll 'em!" The cool words came almost sneeringly from the lips of a tall, sleek individual—a jasper soon identified to Billy as Jake Gleason, saloon keeper, ranch owner, and professional gambler.

Billy pressed nearer to the table, followed closely by his partners. Something—he could not have told what—had drawn him to this game. He knew that it was not his desire to see Gleason. That could wait—and, anyway, he couldn't interrupt the play without violating Western manners.

Playing opposite the gambler, the Montanans saw a slim youth—he couldn't have been more than twenty-one. He was tall, muscular, with a face that might have been good-looking except for the unmistakable signs of dissipation etched there.

Billy noted something else about this youth, whom the gambler had called Sinton. It was an air of desperation, as if his very existence depended upon a turn of the dice. His face was flushed, his eyes too bright. Rolling the dice nervously, he implored in a husky voice:

"Come on, babies! We need the jack. Be one more lucky seven!"

"I'll say he needs it," some one muttered in an undertone. "And a darned sight more'n he'll ever take out of the Cactus Club."

Billy couldn't see the result of the ivories roll. But he didn't need to. The look on young Sinton's face was plenty.

"Darn!" the youth exploded. "I lose again! Another mess o' snake eyes!"

Wiping oozing little beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of one tanned hand, the drink-flushed youth stood watching the run of dice with feverish impatience, as other players rolled them. Then it came his turn to shoot again.

Eagerly he tossed a hundred dollars in bills upon the table—a crumpled collection of fives, tens, and a twenty, fished out from various pockets.

"Come on! Fade me!" he demanded hoarsely.

But already Jake Gleason had covered the bet. The Cactus Club never let a sucker's money find its way into other pockets if it could help it.

With a clicking rattle, snap and roll, Larry Sinton whipped out the cubes of fortune. He won and won again. Lips tight, he made no move to touch the growing heap of currency. The grip of a gambler crowding his luck to the limit was upon him.

He shot his winnings every time, letting the whole amount ride always, in a sort of eager desperation. He seemed to have forgotten entirely that there was a chance of losing. Gleason stood, eyes cold, sneering, even as Larry managed to run that one hundred up to more than eight inside of five swift minutes.

This was foolishness, Billy knew. There was something likable about Larry. He seemed so tense in all he did—a kid battling for high, steep stakes for some purpose the Montanans couldn't fathom.

Billy West spoke impulsively, as Larry won again:

"Better drag down yore velvet, hombre. Yuh can't hit forever!"

Gleason flashed Billy a deadly look, but that bronzed young buckaroo failed to see it. Larry Sinton, with a quick, stubborn shake of his head, had reached for the dice the gambler had swept up.

"No, sir," he answered Billy, defiance in his voice, "I'm rappin' this joint just once more before I pull down a dollar. Gleason's won enough from me. To-day, I get it back. I got to save my cattle!"

So Larry was a rancher, then? And the gambler had some hold upon him? Gleason, frozen-faced once more, was flipping out the cubes to the flushed young hombre.

There was a faint, almost unheard little double click as the saloon keeper passed the ivories over. Tiny as the sound was, two pairs of quick ears caught it. Two spectators became immediately suspicious.

That sounded as if Gleason had switched dice. From now on, both Billy West and Joe Scott would watch this game with even keener interest.

No one else seemed to notice, though. From snatches of conversation, Billy suddenly gathered enough to let him know that those cattle for which Larry Sinton battled were the very ones Billy had considered buying. Hemsley—whom the pards had met back on the Big Bench with the herd, Larry's herd—was Jake Gleason's foreman.

Why, then, Gleason had taken the stuff over already, so sure was he of winning! That meant this whole thing was framed. The gambler knew young Sinton didn't have a chance. Larry had been steered into this game for a downright crooked trimming.

A wave of pity, not unmingled with contempt for the young rancher's weakness, surged through Billy West as this realization struck him.

He thought of interfering, but it was too late now. Larry Sinton had the dice, had blown upon them and snapped them out on the table.

Sixteen hundred dollars hung upon the result of that roll. For recklessly Larry had just staked every last cent of his winnings. Sixteen hundred dollars—somehow mixed up with a herd of cattle!

"Be good to me, bones!" the youth implored. "Yuh got to!"

His eyes were diamondlike in their intensity, as they followed the swiftly spinning ivories.

The dice slowed down and settled. Larry Sinton gasped. A single dot stared up from each dice. Snake eyes! Larry had lost again—lost when it hurt the worst.

"Broke!" he ejaculated.

His face had gone white, in spite of drink and tan. He seemed to reel, as if from a blow. Then suddenly his voice was hoarse, in the suspicion that rushed upon him.

"Let's see them dice, Jake Gleason!"

"Look 'em over," the gambler sneered. "Goin' to cry, huh?" He had quickly raked in his winnings, while Larry grabbed the ivories.

Gleason, leering, stepped back a trifle as young Sinton tested the dice, again and again, by long, slow rolls across the table, for evidence of loading.

They turned up on "nine," "eleven," "four"—all honest points. Never on that mocking loser—snake eyes.

"Satisfied, huh?" Gleason was jeering. "You just overrode your luck, kid. You ain't the first that ever done it."

Larry turned away, his features wan and haggard. He was stumbling slightly.

"Don't be in too big a rush, friend, if you crave to know what's come off here!"

The crisp words, accompanied by a swift reach of an arm, had come from Billy West. Instantly, he had the dice, was hefting them appraisingly in the palm of his right hand.

"If you want the truth, Sinton, I'd inspect 'em with a hatchet," Billy West said quietly.

Jake Gleason whirled upon him. "The heck yuh would!" he snapped. "Give me them bones, yuh meddler!"

Billy smiled tantalizingly, as he slipped the dice into a vest pocket.

"Come and take 'em," he invited.

A snaky look had crept into the gambler's greenish eyes. Suddenly his fingers dived under his coat front at the armpit. From a hidden shoulder holster, a streak of blued steel flashed out and down upon the cool young waddy.

A six-gun roared its thunder. A six-gun thudded to the floor.

Billy West, warned by a look in the gambler's eyes, had drawn, aimed, fired—so swiftly that the action was a mere blur.

And now a shattered right hand for the surprised Jake Gleason, an unfired weapon on the floor at his feet, and a cool young hombre thoroughly in command of the situation, were all that remained of the attempted gun play.

During this clash between the gambler and Billy West, neither Buck nor Joe had drawn a weapon. Their hands, however, hovered near their holstered six-guns, and they stood ready to step in at the first sign of interference from any member of the crowd about the saloon.

No interference came, however. Amazement at the swiftness of Billy's draw was written plainly on every face.

Billy was the first to break the stillness about the room. Turning to his pards, who now stood near him, he said coolly:

"Follow me." And to Larry, standing uncertainly at the gaming table: "Better come along. I aim to inspect these dice, friend."

Young Sinton, a stunned look on his white face, hurried out after the waddies. Together they turned down the street, only to glance back quickly, as a commotion sounded behind them.

Jake Gleason, having regained his numbed senses, had sprung to the door. A rage, fierce and intense, seemed to grip him.

There was no mistaking the depth of menace in his tones, as he ground out the warning:

"Yuh got the drop on me this time, hombre, but there'll be another day. Jake Gleason ain't through with yuh yet, not by a long shot!"

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAIL HERD.

BILLY WEST, for whom this threat was meant, merely shrugged. That cattle deal was off, of course, but he still wanted to know more about it. He'd get the facts from Sinton.

Together with Larry, the Montana waddies swung into their saddles. As they jogged off up the street, Joe Scott threw one last look back toward the Cactus Club.

There was a twinkle in his blue eyes as he said to Billy:

"Looks like Mr. Gleason is shore a little peeved, boss."

"I'm afraid it's much more serious than that," Larry, now thoroughly sobered, put in dubiously. "Gleason's plumb poison. You hombres'd better slope while you're all together."

Buck Foster snorted through his cowhorn mustache: "While *we're* all together, huh? Waal, I'll be a horned toad if thet bird kin tell Circle J what to do! Why, the dirty skunk, I'll jest naturally tear him apart and forgit to put him back ag'in! All together, bah!"

Sing Lo, the little Chinese cook, bringing up the rear of the party, snickered. The chink was never happier than when tormenting Buck.

"Mistlee Bluck plenty blave out in wide-open spaces. Him not so tough back in Cactus Club, though, so be," he said innocently.

Buck turned upon him with a roar: "Yuh yaller-faced, slant-eyed pot wrastler, what am yuh a-sayin'? Guess I knows Billy West! Billy could handle a dozen Gleasons all by himself, couldn't yuh, Billy?"

There was a touch of laugher in Billy's voice as he responded: "Well, we handled one of him, this time. But now that we're about out of town, let's have a look-see at those ivories."

Dismounting, the riders gathered around Billy, who had produced a hatchet from one of Sing Lo's saddlebags. Selecting a boulder, he went to work.

The ivory split and shattered, revealing to him what he had expected—tiny twin bits of steel, by means of which Jake Gleason had made the dice "crap out," through furtive use of a magnetic current at the gambling table.

"All right, Sinton, come take a look," Billy suggested. "Here's just how you've been donatin' Gleason yore fool money."

"I don't need to look. Loaded, o' course." The kid rancher's voice was bitter. "By the glory! Jake Gleason pays me for this. His game's supposed to be on the square. But I should've known better. The Cactus Club's been rimming me regular."

"You been rimming yourself, I'd say," Billy corrected. "Just when and how are you figurin' on makin' him pay yuh?"

"The next time I come to town," Larry Sinton said fiercely.

"Yeah? Goin' to try to collect with a gun, huh?"

"Well, somethin' like that, if I have to."

Billy shook his head doubtfully. "Fat chance you'd have with any gunman, in your condition."

Suddenly his hand had reached out and closed around Larry's wrist.

"Stand still," he ordered, "and look at thet hand of yores. You've been hitting the booze too hard, hombre."

Sure enough, young Sinton's hand shook—slightly, it is true, but too much to permit any effective gun work. It was nerves, however, not lack of nerve, that caused it.

Larry flushed and withdrew his wrist.

"Reckon you're right," he admitted, shamefaced. "In my shape, I wouldn't have a chance against even an average gun hand. But I can't sit down and be robbed, can I?"

"I don't know," Billy snapped, "any more'n I know how much yuh've been robbed already. But yuh can sober up and stay thet way, thet's certain."

Larry's mouth opened, as if about to make a hot retort, but snapped shut instantly. Instead, he mounted, then squared around to face Billy and asked curiously:

"Just who are yuh, stranger, and why all this interest in Larry Sinton?"

The reply came promptly: "Billy

West, Circle J spread; partners, Joe Scott, Buck Foster, and Sing Lo, cook. Buying feeder cattle to ship back home—Montana."

Larry's response was true to Western custom: "Glad to meet yuh, Circle J. I'm shore grateful to yuh for openin' my eyes. Better bed down with me to-night at the Shoe String."

"Shoe String?" Buck exclaimed in puzzlement.

Larry nodded, with a bitter smile. "Yep, my ranch. The name does double duty now. A knotted shoe string is what the brand looks like, and I've shore been runnin' it on jist thet—a shoe string. Yuh'll come, won't yuh, hombres?"

Billy assented readily, thinking, as he did so, that he had not yet explained his interest in Larry. As yet, he had this to analyze to himself. Billy West was no trouble hunter, yet he had deliberately horned in in this young stranger's behalf when he saw him being cheated at the Cactus Club.

Perhaps it was the tragic look in Larry's bloodshot eyes, he thought, or the hopeless droop of the broad shoulders. He smiled a little as he thought of himself in the rôle of reformer. Many times, the Circle J had helped men fight on the side of right, but never before had they tried to protect a jasper from himself, Billy West reflected.

Suddenly he became alive to the fact that Larry, leading the way, had turned north along the Big Bench—a high, shelflike bluff jutting out from the rugged Sacramentos. For miles it stretched, a wide, gigantic, sharp-rimmed footstool, well grassed and cattle-prime.

Fine grazing country, Billy knew. And Larry's ranch lay this way?

"Why, sure it does," the Circle J owner muttered to himself. "At least, it was miles back along here thet we met thet Hemsley jigger, with the herd of cattle I asked about. Larry's stuff, I know now. Or Gleason's—which? After thet crooked crap game, just who do they belong to?"

Billy's brow clouded in thought. He was about to put fresh questions to the kid rancher, when Joe Scott asked Larry bluntly:

"Say, how'd yuh ever come ter git tangled up with a crook like Gleason, nohow?"

"His ranch—the 7 Bar," Larry explained, "has always joined the Shoe String. Him and dad was neighbors. Then dad was killed in a spill from his horse, a long time ago. Me not bein' of age, Gleason was made my guardian."

A haunted look came into young Sinton's eyes. "The ranch's been goin' to pot almost ever since," he said drearily. "Cows disappeared, and what was left never seemed to have calves. Anyhow, when I come of age and took things over, I had next to nothin'.

"The land was there, but the stock was derned near gone. And yet Gleason's books seemed to stack up right. He's a smooth one, thet crook!"

Discouraged but game, Larry had foolishly tried to build up a stake to buy more cows by gambling at the Cactus. But his winnings proved few, his losses heavy. Soon, what little stock he had left was plastered to Jake Gleason—cool-eyed, smiling, always ready to lend him gambling money.

"The notes on them cattle are due to-day," the youth finished hopelessly. "Thet's why I risked every last dollar I could scrape up, tryin' to win enough to pay off thet snaky hombre."

"Well, anyway, yore land itself is

still in the clear, isn't it?" Billy West asked cheerfully.

Young Sinton shook his head. "Nope. Notes due on it, too, next month. Yuh see," he excused himself almost childishly, Billy thought, "I figgered I couldn't lose all the time."

Joe Scott suddenly interrupted Larry's dejected flow of explanation.

"Looks like a trail herd comin' this way, boss," the redhead grunted, pointing along the Big Bench's sharp rim toward a long, low-hanging dust cloud drifting slowly toward them in the fading daylight.

The others looked at once.

"My cattle!" Larry almost moaned. "Thet's Barb Hemsley, Gleason's foreman, riding there at point. They've took 'em over. But it's too late to cry about it now, I reckon."

Billy West's shoulders shrugged in disgust. "Say, yuh give up too easy," he said scornfully. "In the first place, a gamblin' debt ain't legal—although if it's an honest one, I'd pay it. In the second, those dice were crooked. How do yuh know yuh didn't really win on thet last roll? It's a cinch, anyhow, thet Gleason didn't."

"Yo're right!" Larry brightened for an instant. "But"—dejection was overcoming his hopes again—"they've got possession now. I can't do anything, I reckon."

Buck Foster, who had remained quiet only by an effort during the discussion between Larry and Billy, now put in roughly:

"Kid, yuh jist leave it ter the Circle J. By jumpin' juniper! We'll up and take 'em back! We'll show thet crooked Gleason whar ter git off!" The gruff old-timer swaggered.

"But thet—thet wouldn't be legal, would it?" Larry asked.

"Are those loaded ivories in my vest pocket legal?" was Billy's terse response. "Fight fire with fire, I say. The law'll uphold yuh."

Pressing the sides of his chestnut stallion with his knees, Billy set forth at a gallop toward the approaching cattle.

With whoops of delight, Buck and Joe—an eagerness for battle kindling in their eyes—fell in behind promptly. Larry followed dubiously.

But suddenly, summoning courage, he raced up beside Billy. His voice was strangely resolute, as he cried:

"Right? Of course yo're right! I'll make the first move, West. This is my fight, I reckon."

Billy nodded, grinning. There was good stuff in this kid, at bottom, just as he'd suspected.

"Gitee up, pony!" Sing Lo, bringing up the rear, thumped the sides of his piebald with vigorous heels, as he chirped excitedly: "Circle J gotee save Mistlee Larry's cow herd flom them clooked homblays!"

CHAPTER III.

FIRST CLASH.

"BARB" HEMSLEY, long, sour-faced foreman of the 7 Bar, watched the approaching riders with cold gray eyes, as they jogged up across the benchland. A mile away, he had recognized Larry among the other riders, from the way he sat his saddle.

Moving swiftly across the front of the herd, Hemsley fell in beside Stet Ringo, the other point man. Both were armed, as always.

The cattle shuffled on, with a third rider back at swing, and another touching up the drags. Ringo—a slant-featured, high-cheeked man—nodded at the nearing horsemen.

"Say, does thet Sinton kid know about us taking over this stuff today?" he questioned.

"If he don't, he'll soon find out!" Hemsley grunted shortly.

Larry trotted up, flanked by the Circle J men. Turning his mount across the front of the cattle, he spoke coolly:

"Howdy, fellahs! Sorry to put yuh out, but I've decided not to let Gleason have this stuff so easy."

Hemsley, bleak-eyed, reined in to face the youth. "Yore debt's paid off, then, I suppose," he sneered.

"In one way—yes," Billy snapped, referring to Larry's losses at the Cactus Club.

The 7 Bar foreman cast a single glance at the Circle J owner. Then his sour gaze returned to Larry.

"If thet's so, show me a release from Gleason, kid. If yuh ain't got it, yo're just wastin' time hyar." The man's voice was hard and rasping.

Larry shook his head, determined. "I figger I don't need a release. This stock's mine, by rights. I'm keepin' 'em, Hemsley. We'll just turn them back now."

Barb Hemsley laughed shortly. "Hardly. Fat chance yuh got o' gettin' away with thet. Ringo, shove the cattle on around them dumb-bells!"

The high-cheeked 7 Bar puncher started to obey. With a quick touch of his spurs, Larry Sinton shot in to stop the action.

But already Billy West had decided that it was time to show his hand. His voice crackled as he barked:

"One move toward thet gun, Hemsley, and I'll drill yuh!"

Already Hemsley's hand had started for a weapon, but now he hesitated. The foreman's pale eyes stared hard at the young Montanan's own holstered .45, then back again to Billy's face, in swift calculation.

The next second, Hemsley's hand was stabbing for his gun butt.

Crash-h-h! Br-ro-oo-m! Billy's .45, which had remained holstered until Hemsley had cleared leather, roared its leaden message. The foreman's gun, still unfired, flew from the fellow's fingers.

Hemsley sat his saddle, staring foolishly at the hand which had so recently held that weapon. Billy, however, had taken such accurate aim that the foreman's fingers remained uninjured, though numbed from the impact of bullet against six-gun. Billy didn't want to hurt these hombres, unless they forced him.

But now a sudden shot and a tumult of wildly swerving hoofs crashed out behind him. Billy started to turn. With a furious oath, Hemsley, seizing his advantage, spurred straight at him.

Instantly Billy showered up a slug that snarled through the fellow's heavy Stetson. Barb Hemsley paled, for the Circle J owner had sidestepped his chestnut neatly to one side, dodged the effort to run him down, and now cut a second bullet almost beneath the foreman's chin point.

With a frightened grunt, Hemsley dropped low on the far side of his saddle. Unarmed and with no further chance for the element of surprise now, the hombre wasn't foolish enough to rush that gun again.

Instead, he whirled his horse away through the boulder field that strewed the near-by benchland.

Jerking about from Hemsley now, Billy beheld Larry Sinton, his face taut, his eyes like blazing coals, forcing the Ringo jasper to let go of a

half-drawn six-gun. With a quick reach, Larry took it.

Meanwhile, the herd of cattle had wheeled and gone pounding back along the bench. The two riders at swing and drag made no attempt to turn them. Savage snarls on their lips, they were spurring their mounts through the thinning welter of backs toward the scene of battle.

Buck and Joe, however, seemed waiting for just such action. With wild whoops, they charged out to block the hombres.

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck yelled excitedly. "I'll make yuh wish yuh'd never seen a cow, yuh tough-lookin' polecats!"

Joe Scott was saying nothing, but the determined look on his freckled face showed plainly what those toughs were in for.

"Drop them guns!" Buck Foster roared, as the Circle J pair raced out before the others.

"Yeah, show sense, and yuh'll live longer!" the red-headed Joe snapped tersely.

The 7 Bar riders, just breaking through the cattle, yanked to a hurried halt. Their fingers were on their gun triggers, but still they hesitated.

Hard-boiled gun slingers both, they had started charging in when the fight seemed anybody's. But now things were quite different. Gazing into the bores of two leveled six-guns held by waddies who quite evidently knew how to use them, the jaspers suddenly found themselves both uncertain and unhappy.

With a muttered oath, one of them let his weapon plop to earth. The other made as if to follow his example. But suddenly, snarling furiously, he hurled his gun, with all the brute force he could command, straight at Joe Scott's forehead.

The redhead, although totally unprepared for such a move, spurred his horse violently and, in the same instant, jerked his head aside. The heavy gun whizzed past, missing him by inches.

His swerving horse had him at a disadvantage. Buck Foster, however, was not to be overlooked in this little mêlée.

No sooner had the tough's gun started streaking toward Joe's head than Buck tore, with a howl, at the savage jasper.

"Yuh tricky skunk!" he raved. "Yuh'd throw guns at me pard, huh? I'll be a horned toad if any yellow-livered hombre gits away with thet! I'll knock yore dirty block off!"

Entirely forgetful of his own gun in his eagerness to reach close quarters for some fist work, the veteran was almost frothing at the mouth. Wildly he swung at the other's jaw, but that jasper wasn't the type to stand up to such an onslaught.

Spurring his horse viciously, the fellow was off as hard as he could go toward the spot where he'd last glimpsed his foreman. Buck Foster rode furiously to overtake him.

"Sufferin' wild cats, Buck—the cattle!" Joe Scott almost screamed in sudden excitement. "We gotter help save 'em! Leave thet harmless gunman be. Come on!"

Hipping about in the saddle, the grizzled cowpoke saw what had so filled the redhead with alarm. The herd, frightened by the shots and abandoned by Gleason's men, was rushing directly toward the brink of the Big Bench! Billy, Larry, and Sing Lo were flying out to turn them.

Fast horses did the work. The brink still lay a quarter of a mile away. The waddies swept ahead of the lumbering brutes, swerved them by skillful riding, and gradually got the herd to milling.

Sing Lo, highly excited, had lapsed into his native lingo and was hurling Chinese threats in a high-pitched, squeaky voice at the cow brutes. His pards chuckled, in spite of themselves, then suddenly woke up to the fact that the 7 Bar riders were once more spurring at them.

Hemsley and his men, seeing their chance, had grabbed up their guns and were trying a rear attack.

"Give 'em lead, since they insist!" Billy snapped.

Turning about quickly, Larry and the Circle J men whipped such a hail of bullets about the nearing foe that soon all heart was taken from them. The 7 Bar riders, suddenly deciding that home was a safer place to be, were whirling, bolting.

Hemsley, though, raved back over his shoulder:

"Yuh cain't git away with this, Sinton! Yuh've outlucked us so fer, but this ain't all. We mean ter have them cattle!"

The jasper's face was like a thundercloud as he tore on with his punchers.

Together with the Circle J men, Larry sat watching Gleason's foreman ride away with the rest of the outfit. Young Sinton's lean face was resolute, yet his dark eyes held a tinge of worry. Hemsley's threats, he knew, were anything but idle.

Billy West clapped him on the shoulder. "Cheer up, hombre!" he cried. "Yuh showed all the makin's of a real man to-day. I'm proud of yuh."

Joe Scott's big-beaked face split in a wide grin. "Thet goes fer me, too," he said heartily.

"Yes, sir, put her thar, pard!" Buck Foster blustered, sticking out a horny paw. "Yuh shore done noble."

And even Sing Lo added, "So be" —his seal of approval.

Larry blushed. "Thanks," he said. "I kind o' surprised myself. Yuh see," he added, "I knew I had some first-rate backin'."

Turning their attention to the herd, the pards shoved on for the Shoe String. The ranch still lay several miles away. Darkness had fallen, and the moon was riding high, before they neared their destination.

A homy atmosphere hung about the cluster of long, low dobe buildings, Billy thought, when he saw them through the moonlight. Nevertheless, he couldn't help noticing the run-down appearance of the place, as they drew steadily nearer.

A good ranch gone to seed—that summed it up in half a dozen words. How different, Billy reflected, from the neat orderliness of Circle J, back in far-off Montana.

The Shoe String sure needed working on, but Billy's thoughts swung quickly to the immediate present. Trouble lay ahead, if he was any judge of men. Gleason and Hemsley were the kind who struck. Jogging up beside Larry, Billy West suggested:

"Better put the herd in a corral as close to the house as yuh can get 'em. Keep 'em under watch. How many punchers," he asked, "have yuh got ridin' for yuh?"

Larry laughed. "Not a one," he said, a touch of the old bitterness returning.

"Then it's up to us all," Billy declared, "to take turns at night guardin'."

CHAPTER IV.

SING LO—REFORMER.

LARRY, who had already acquired confidence in Billy, together with considerable admiration, assented unquestionably to this proposal. He, too, knew that there was every likelihood of further trouble.

The first two watches fell to Buck and Joe. Meanwhile, Billy and Larry, stretched comfortably before the great rounded corner fireplace, talked for hours over various aspects of the situation.

A cheerful fire of juniper and cedar logs cast weird shadows on the heavy-timbered ceiling. Sing Lo, his supper dishes washed, appeared to doze on a rough couch in the far corner of the long living room.

Apparently the little chink paid no slightest heed to his boss and Larry.

Billy, while not assuming to preach, set himself to convince young Sinton tactfully of the serious mistake he was making in his ways of living. There was some excuse for Larry, at that. Since the death of his father, his rôle had been difficult for an unbridled youngster.

"At first, I considered dad's death just an accident," he muttered, "one thet could happen to any rider. But the more I think about it, the harder it is to believe that dad, raised in the saddle, could've been throwed by a horse thet was just average frisky.

"It happened," Larry explained, "at fall round-up. Gleason was there, and most of the other ranchers. After breakfast, everybody started to top off their circle horses —and the next thing we knew, dad was on the ground, his neck broken."

The kid rancher's mouth hardened slightly. "Gleason reached him first, and cried out thet the cinch had parted. Thet seemed straight enough— then. Reckon I was too upset to reason things out much," he sighed. "Anyway, Gleason soon got to be my guardian."

Then, almost before he knew it, Larry was telling the whole unhappy story of his life since that time. Gleason, it seemed to Billy, was always in the background.

It was Gleason's toughs who had first dropped in for an occasional friendly card game. Then an offhand invitation to ride with them to town, a drink or two, until now Larry sat amid the ruins of what should have been a prosperous spread.

"Just a lonely boy's longings for companionship, in the beginning," Billy thought sympathetically.

He understood plainly enough. Nevertheless, the thing for Larry to do was to lay off bad company, drink, and gambling. Billy told him so shortly.

This time, Larry showed no resentment. Instead, he nodded slowly.

"I reckon you're right," he admitted. "Heck! I know you are." His hand shot out. "Shake," he said. "I'm through with liquor and all that goes with it!"

Billy smiled. "Fine!" Then he looked at his watch. "Gosh!" he exclaimed. "It's about time for me to go on night guard."

Picking up his hat and a leather jacket, he hurried outside to relieve Buck, for he didn't believe in shoving extra work onto his partners.

Nothing had happened, however, to break the peace and quiet about the Shoe String, when Billy's watch had ended and he went in to wake Larry. Crawling in between warm blankets, the Circle J boss was asleep in no time.

Dawn had come before his slumbers were broken. Then his senses returned with a jar. Great banging, clanging noises came to his ear, seemingly from the rear of the ranch house.

For a moment, he lay listening. It couldn't be an attack on the ranch; that was not gunfire he heard. Anyway, his pals would have called him.

Jumping out of bed, Billy threw on his clothes and hurried toward the kitchen, where the noises seemed to be centered. So peculiar had this commotion been that not once did he suspect its cause.

By the time he had reached the inner kitchen door, however, the sounds had resolved themselves into an unmistakable tinny rattle, surely pots and pans! But what——

Pushing open the door, Billy peered anxiously inside—just in time to be struck on the nose by a tin plate which, as far as he knew, seemed to fall from the ceiling.

A dim kerosene lamp burned in a far corner of the room. Stationed amid a scattered heap of tinware was Sing Lo, in the midst of an act that made the bronzed young waddy's eyes bulge.

"Whee!" the little man was cackling excitedly, without having noticed Billy yet. "Whoopee! Me do um!"

With a long wooden spoon balanced upon the end of his nose, the little Oriental was weaving back and forth upon one foot. On the toe of the other foot, tin plates were spinning. Already one had been slung, somehow, to the unsteady peak of the spoon.

Billy stared. Sing Lo, he knew, had once traveled as an assistant to a fourth-rate magician, but the Circle J boss had never seen him try a stunt like this. Suddenly, though, suspicion rushed upon him.

With an expectant grunt, the little cook coaxed his waving foot upward. A spinning plate sailed into the air, the idea being, Billy saw, to make it land safely within the one already balanced on the spoon.

Sing Lo flattered himself, however. The plate did neither. With a rattle and bang, plate and spoon, with a disappointed little chink, crashed noisily to the floor. Sing Lo had lost his balance.

"Too bad! Too bad! Sing Lo tly again, so be!" he was saying to himself as he scrambled to his feet.

It was at this time that he first noticed Billy West standing in the doorway, an expression of puzzlement, not unmixed with anger, upon his features.

Grinning owlishly, while he collected the pans for another effort, Sing Lo confided:

"'Lo, bloss! Fine day! Chinkee velly fine juggler, so be! Velly fline!" he continued, meanwhile unconcernedly tossing many plates into the air at once, in what he considered another clever bit of juggling.

Striding across the room, Billy grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and shook him until his pigtail flopped up and down.

"Sing Lo, what's got into you?" he said sharply.

Sing Lo, staggering a bit from the vigorous shaking, answered thickly:

"Plenty glood tanglefoot, so be!" He winked one eye slyly.

"Yuh yaller heathen! Where'd you get tanglefoot, as you call it?" Billy demanded.

His suspicions had been correct. Sing Lo had been drinking. An occasional spree was the little chink's one weakness.

"Me findee in pantry. Sing Lo hear you tell Mistlee Larry no take dlink. So Sing Lo help him keep plomise. No temptee, no drinkee—see, bloss? Tanglefoot velly fine for cooky," he prattled on. "Velly blad for Larry."

Billy West had an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh, but he checked himself. Better not encourage the chink, he thought, no matter what his reasons.

Instead, he took Sing Lo by both

shoulders and sat him down in a chair roughly.

"Now you sit there, until we get some breakfast around here," he said angrily. Sing Lo, slant eyes almost round with wonder, sat in fear.

Picking up the pans, and restoring some semblance of order to the kitchen, Billy strode in to wake Buck and Joe. How they could sleep through all that turmoil was more than he could understand, but sleep through it they did.

Larry had not returned to bed after his watch—the last one. Instead, he had attacked the woodpile, where Billy now found him, his ax beating a rhythmic tattoo on the frosty wood. Billy thought he saw new light and vigor in Larry's eyes as he laid down his ax and went striding into the kitchen.

The combined efforts of the Circle J men and Larry soon had a steaming breakfast on the table. Not without many growls and threats against Sing Lo from Buck, however.

"Hyar I done had my mouth all set fer some o' thet danged pot-wrastler's sinkers," the veteran fumed, "an thet red-headed Joe can't cook. Look at them biscuits. Why, I can't even bite through 'em!"

"Swaller 'em whole, then," Joe taunted. "Yuh couldn't chew 'em, nohow, yuh old toothless Piute!"

Sing Lo still sat in the corner. He wasn't hungry, anyway. He felt drowsy. Slowly he began to nod. His head drooped lower and lower. He was sleeping now. Sing Lo, the reformer!

Buck and Joe kept up their usual quarrel all during breakfast. Larry was plainly amused. Billy, however, seemed uneasy. Suddenly he said to young Sinton:

"Larry, didn't yuh tell me yuh borrowed a thousand dollars from Gleason on thet herd of cattle? Thet's the amount of his note, isn't it?"

The kid rancher nodded unhappily.

"Well, if I pay Gleason off—cancel thet note—will yuh turn the cattle over to me?" All through the meal, Billy had been thinking, planning. More lay back of his proposal than appeared on the surface.

Larry hesitated. It looked to him as if he were about to lose his herd, after all. Suddenly, though, he blurted:

"They're worth twice thet much, West, but—— Oh, hang it all! You're such a square shooter, I'd rather yuh had 'em than Gleason. Yuh've saved 'em for me, anyhow. Go ahead—they're yores. Take 'em!"

"Say, boss, I thought yuh was buyin' 'threes,' not five-year-olds like them," Buck Foster cut in quickly.

"So I am," Billy replied. He much preferred three-year-old stock for feeders.

But the note on Larry's ranch itself, he understood, was little more than a thousand. With the herd in his possession, Billy thought he knew how to raise the money.

He didn't explain, however, and he had reasons of his own for not offering Larry all they were worth—the full two thousand.

The youth meant to quit his bad habits, Billy knew; yet with cash in his hands, there was the possibility that Larry might be tempted back to the gambling table. Such habits weren't dropped easily.

"It's a deal, then, Larry," Billy said, "and if things go as I hope, yuh won't be sorry."

"Well"—Larry smiled bitterly—"a ranch without cattle is no ranch a-tall, but I lose my cows either way. Anyway"—he brightened—

"Gleason can't hold thet note over me any longer."

"Nope," said Billy, "I'm payin' him off to-day, although I got a hunch he'd rather have the stock than the money."

A short time later, Billy, on his prize mount, Danger, loped out of the ranch yard, with Joe Scott as his companion. Buck, much to that veteran's disgust, had been left behind with Larry and Sing Lo, the latter sleeping peacefully.

Joe Scott asked no questions. He was content, as always, to follow Billy's lead. As they neared the little town of Mañana, Billy West instructed:

"Keep yore eyes and ears open for trouble, Joe. Gleason may not be inclined to give up any part of his hold on the Shoe String. We might have to do a little coaxin'."

"Count on me, boss," Joe said.

A short time later, they dismounted in front of the Cactus Club Saloon. Hitching their gun belts a little farther toward the front, they strode purposefully in through the swinging half doors.

A strange quiet fell upon the room, as the two Montana waddies stopped, for a second, to accustom their eyes to the gloom. The place seemed crowded for this early hour in the morning.

Shifty-eyed men lounged about, their hands never far from gun butts. Among them were Hemsley and Stet Ringo. Remembering Gleason's threats of the day before, Billy thought to himself that he and Joe were about as safe here as in a den of rattlers.

Followed closely by the redhead, he strode, without a word, toward Gleason's office at the rear of the bar. Without so much as a tap, he pushed the door inward, and the two Montanans stepped inside.

Sly winks passed from one to another of the gunmen, as they inched their way cautiously toward the door behind which Billy and Joe had disappeared.

Gleason sat alone at his desk, a half-empty whisky bottle before him. A look of smug satisfaction came over his cold, sneering face as he noted, apparently without surprise, the entrance of the two waddies.

"Well?" he questioned, without giving Billy opportunity to speak.

Billy's reply came at once: "I'm payin' off the debt on the Sinton cattle, Gleason. Reckon I'll just trade you the money for that canceled note."

Already Billy was fishing in a pocket for his bill fold. A crafty look crept into Gleason's greenish eyes.

"All right, toss 'er over," he grunted, at the same time turning to a safe behind him. Reaching in, he pulled out a legal-looking document.

At sight of the note, Billy dropped the money on the gambler's desk. Gleason swept it up quickly.

"Now," said Billy, "if you'll just mark that note 'paid'——" He was shoving a pen at the cold-eyed Gleason.

"Not so fast!" Gleason's tones were leering. "I told yuh not to interfere with me, fellah. The money's mine now—and so are them cattle!"

He laughed gloatingly. "Mebbe this'll learn you a lesson, and if you don't like it, jasper," he snarled, "try to make a row. My men are waitin' out front, in case you get hostile. They'll be plenty glad to burn you birds down—and swear self-defense."

Already Gleason's hand was inching toward a shoulder holster.

CHAPTER V.

DEBT PAYMENT.

THIS snaky move escaped neither Billy West nor Joe Scott, however. They had not forgotten the day before, in the Cactus.

"Oh, yeah?" Billy snapped.

And before Gleason knew what had happened, he was staring down the black bore of a leveled .45. Gleason's hands dropped, nerveless, to his sides. Evidently, he, too, had not yet forgotten the previous day.

Even as Billy's gun came out, Joe sprang toward the door behind them. Almost in one movement, it seemed, he shot the bolt and leveled his gun at a spot directly between the gambler's pale-green eyes.

The sound of the bolt being pushed on the door, however, told Gleason's waiting gunmen that all was not well within. Hardly had Joe's hand left the bolt, when the voice of Hemsley called out excitedly:

"Hey, what's the big idea o' lockin' thet door?" At the same time, he shook it with tremendous violence.

"Yuh fools! What'd I put you out there for?" Gleason was raving. "Git in here, blast yuh all for a bunch of numskulls!"

"We're comin', boss! We're comin'," Stet Ringo shouted.

The young Montanans, however, had no intention of waiting to see the door crashed in. As the sound of lunging bodies and furiously pounding six-guns came to them, Billy strode to Gleason.

In a cool, businesslike manner, he shoved his gun in between Gleason's shoulder blades, while he commanded:

"Now if you know what's good for you, you'll just sign thet piece of paper."

The tricky gambler glanced helplessly at the door, so far resisting all attempts to burst it inward; then back at Billy and Joe. The waddies' eyes were grim, their steady six-guns more so.

"We may not get out o' here alive, fellah, but yuh'll be the first to go," Joe warned him.

"I'll sign!" Gleason picked up a pen shakily. "But you two'll never get out o' town with it, I kin tell yuh!"

Even as he grasped the pen, the sound of splintering wood, followed by a singing leaden slug resounded through the room. The door was giving at last. Bullets were thudding at a rapid rate into the split door paneling.

Joe backed toward the one window in the room and, with his gun still leveled on Gleason, raised the sash with his left hand.

Billy swiftly grabbed the canceled note.

"Quick!" he hissed, shoving the paper into Joe's outstretched hand. "Make a run for it. Save that note at all costs!"

Joe was out of the window even before he heard the last of Billy's orders.

Zing-g-g! A bullet cut through the partial opening and whizzed past Billy's ear.

He ducked. The action nearly proved his undoing.

Gleason, his courage bolstered up by the nearness of help, the threat of Joe's gun removed, lunged viciously toward Billy. A swinging right caught Billy on the side of his head. He staggered.

Instantly Gleason's gun was out. But Billy, regaining his feet with an immense effort of will, whipped up his own .45 and, summoning all his strength, let the gambler have it hard upon the forehead.

Gleason dropped like a sack.

Crash-h! the heavy door gave way.

The forms of gunmen came with it, just as Billy West, .45 still out and now trained on the scrambling henchmen, reached the window sill.

A spring, a thud, and Billy West landed, running almost before he gained his footing.

Bullets now hummed around him. Dodging, ducking, weaving, he shot around a corner and to the front of the Cactus Club.

Danger, reins dragging, stood impatiently. With one leap, Billy was in the saddle.

Danger sensed immediately what to do. Without even so much as a coaxing word from Billy, he gathered his legs beneath him and was gone. When Gleason's gunmen finally reached the front of the saloon, all that could be seen of Billy was a disappearing dust cloud.

Gleason staggered to the door, fierce anger burning in his eyes.

"Let 'im go," he snarled. "Jake Gleason still has another ace in the hole, blast him!"

At a fork in the road where he could command the entrance to the Cactus Club, Billy found Joe Scott waiting. A broad smile was on his homely, freckled face.

"Guess our friend, Jake, reckoned without the Circle J again, huh, boss?" He grinned as Billy dashed up.

"Yes, but we'll take no chances. I'll be happier when that canceled note is locked up in the safe at the Shoe String."

They rode on alertly, ready for any pursuit if it should be attempted. One of Gleason's holds on Larry was removed now, anyhow. And the fellow could try no shyster law tricks now about the reclaiming of the cattle the previous day.

The miles of the Big Bench sped behind. Danger—a fine combination of thoroughbred and mustang strain—ate up the ground with a rippling ease that Billy always found exhilarating. Joe Scott was well mounted, also. The cowboys, flushed with their triumph, were grinning when they reached the Shoe String.

The midday meal was waiting. Sing Lo, a very sober and penitent little cook, met them at the kitchen door.

"Howdy, bloss! Howdy, Joe!" he said blandly. "Sing Lo have velly fine dinner, so be. Mistlee Larry show chink how Mexlicans cook. Me tly him. Velly good."

"Waal, stop the chatter and let's eat," roared Buck Foster from the wash bench, wiping the last remnants of soapy water from his grizzled mustache, and making a break for the table.

"Yuh had breakfast, didn't yuh?" jeered Joe Scott.

Buck snorted, but before he could think of a hot retort, a happy little Chinese cook set the food before them. He was smiling proudly.

"Free-hol-eys," he pronounced carefully, setting the steaming bowl of frijoles on the table. A platter of enchiladas, each topped with a demure-looking fried egg, and a plate of tortillas completed Sing Lo's surprise.

The Circle J men had eaten Mexican dishes many times on their trips to the Southwest, but never had Sing Lo attempted to serve any of them.

Buck Foster, however, always felt the need to grumble. He did it for pastime.

"Huh!" he growled. "American food's good enough fer me. Thet danged chink'll have us eatin' rice with chopsticks, next thing we

know." Buck, in the meantime, was eating greedily.

"At the rate yo're going," Joe scoffed, "we'd better get yuh a shovel. Imagine thet old Piute eatin' with chopsticks! Haw-haw-haw!"

Billy, in the meantime, had been talking quietly with Larry, acquainting him with what had happened in the Cactus Club and mentioning a further move which Billy thought would prove helpful. Beyond saying that it related to the mortgage on the ranch, he would give no details.

Billy believed in arousing no false hopes. The thing might possibly fall through. It was purely a business matter, anyhow—one that his greater experience gave him a chance to swing, while Larry might have missed it.

Dinner over, the pards followed Buck back to the corral, where he had spent the morning repairing a gate and remedying other run-down conditions about the stock inclosure.

"What this hyar place needs," he bragged to Joe, "am an hombre like me who knows how ter fix things up, and who ain't afeerd of a little work, by heifers!"

The redhead jeered, although the veteran really was a tireless worker. A quarrel would have been on the way at once if Billy, seeing a chance to break a bit of news to Buck, hadn't interrupted.

"All right, old-timer, thet's fine," he declared, with a sly wink at Joe. "I'm glad yuh see things thet way. Yuh can just stay on with Larry a few days and help him out. Me and Joe are goin' on a little trek across the mountains."

Buck took the news with a snort. Something was up, he believed, and he was about to be left out of it.

Suddenly he blew up. "Waal, of all the danged dirty tricks ter do a pard!" he bellowed. "What'd yuh two do without me if you got inter trouble?"

"Thet's why we're not takin' yuh, maybe," Joe teased. "*We* knows enough ter keep out o' trouble."

"Yuh might tell a feller whar yo're goin'," Buck fumed.

"Over the mountain, to take Larry's cattle," Billy explained. "We'll be back in a day or so, if everything goes right. Don't worry."

Buck was now more hurt than angry. Billy, however, knew just what to say to put the old-timer back upon his feet.

Placing a hand affectionately on Buck's shoulder, he said soothingly:

"Somebody's got to stay with Larry, Buck. We're going to try to get him out o' this mess, but he's got to be kept straight in the bargain. Besides, he'll need yuh worse than we do, if Gleason should try any tricks."

Buck, appeased, swelled up until the buttons on his ratty old bearskin vest seemed about to pop.

"Just leave them skunks ter me, boss," he boasted, all resentment immediately forgotten. "I'll make a man out o' Larry, and mincement out o' any coyote what tries ter stop me!"

Billy smiled. "I knew I could count on yuh, Buck," he said.

The veteran returned to his work. Billy, after a few terse words with Larry, swung into the saddle. A few minutes later, he and Joe, together with Sing Lo, who was to act as cook, were shoving the former Shoe String herd on up into the mountains.

After a time, Billy hipped about to gaze down from the climbing foot-

hills that rolled on, fold after timbered fold, toward a distant gap in the rugged range. Below him lay the Big Bench and the Shoe String.

He chuckled. Far beneath him, he could make out young Sinton, a tiny dot of a figure, riding the iron seat of a mowing machine cutting its swathes across a mountain hayfield.

Larry, expecting to lose his ranch, had previously made no effort to put up feed against the winter. But Billy and the Circle J men had instilled new hope in him. Larry couldn't see how things were going to work out, but somehow Billy's confidence had inspired him.

"Make a hand of yoreself; get this ranch back in shape," Billy had snapped, before leaving. "Here you been lettin' go to seed a place worth an easy ten thousand. Fix up yore fences and corrals. Get yore hay pitched. Why, your winter wood ain't even cut yet!"

Well, the puzzled Larry was busy now; Billy smiled to himself, with a glow of satisfaction. Plenty of real solid stuff left in that boy, at bottom. Good, hard, tiring work was all he needed, to keep him away from town and its temptations.

And knowing Buck as he did, Billy was sure that the veteran would set a real example for him.

Everything would be all right, if only Gleason didn't strike before this trip was over.

CHAPTER VI.

CROOKED TACTICS.

MEANWHILE, Larry went busily about his haying. With a newfound pride in his work, he cut and raked and stacked the sun-dried forage, while Buck Foster mended fences tirelessly.

Three days passed quickly, filled with sturdy labor. Then the pair bent themselves to snaking in and piling up wood down by the old log blacksmith shop, with its small gasoline sawing outfit.

Gradually the sky grew soft and hazy. Wood smoke from the kitchen fire wreathed low about the chimney. A storm was on the way—a dread norther perhaps, Larry knew—for this was a weather-breeder.

Supplies were running low. Buck Foster, fearing to let Larry go into town for them, suggested, rather wisely for that old-timer:

"Thet Mexican meal yuh showed the chink how ter cook wasn't so bad. S'posin' yuh stick around the house to-day and cook the freeholies. I'll just run inter town and pick us up a few supplies before this storm breaks."

Larry assented readily enough. He'd rather enjoyed fixing up the old place, anyway, these last few days. Besides, he didn't yet feel that he could trust himself around liquor and cards.

Buck, reveling in satisfaction with himself at having managed Larry so easily, rattled off down the rough mountain road in the Shoe String's old buckboard. He hit the Big Bench and rambled on, totally unaware that a lone horseman, watching from a near-by ridge, had turned and galloped hastily off toward 7 Bar headquarters.

Jake Gleason and his men were evidently keeping well informed about goings-on at the Shoe String.

Buck took longer in town than he had intended. The rough old-timer was taking his new duties very seriously, and had made a list of the necessary purchases, figuring this would help him get through sooner.

Selecting the general store which looked most promising, he entered importantly, his list—scribbled la-

boriously on a dirty piece of wrapping paper—clutched tightly in his hand.

A doddering, wizened little man, eyes pale and watery behind steel-rimmed glasses, emerged from a barrel seat behind a rusty wood stove.

"Somethin' fer yuh, stranger?" he queried in a high-pitched, squeaky voice.

Buck extended his list proudly. "Fill this hyar order," he said, "and I'll be back in half an hour."

A puzzled look came over the little man's face as he peered at the scribbled order. Buck's spelling was wretched. He could hardly scrawl his own name, much less form other words correctly.

"Hm-m-m, light's kind o' pore in hyar, mister," the storekeeper mumbled apologetically, "an' I cain't see as well's I used ter. Mind givin' me a leetle help with this? What's this hyar word, fer instance?"

Buck flushed and strode back angrily toward the counter.

"What's what?" he demanded, taking the paper from the old man's hand and staring down at the word toward which the other pointed.

"Thet?" the veteran cried. "Thet's soap,' yuh idiot! 'S-O-P-E.' Can't yuh spell nothin'?"

"Hm-m-m! Soap? Waal, mebbe 'tis." The storekeeper shook his head. "I jist wanted ter be shore. Yuh see, stranger, it looked like 'dope' ter me, and I don't handle no sech thing as thet. I ain't got no use fer hopheads and——"

"Say-y," Buck flared at once, "does yer mean ter be callin' me a dopehead? Why, plague my neck, if I don't jist up and show yuh——"

"No, no," the other made haste to soothe the rather simple-minded cowhand, "I didn't mean thet a-tall. No offense intended. Let's check this list right quick, mister."

Together they went down the various items—"bakun," "apels," "kofy," and the other badly misspelled scrawlings.

Each time, Buck had to growl the true word—"bacon," "coffee," "dried apples" and so forth, as the storekeeper's finger reached the dubious item. The veteran was fuming when the list came to an end with:

"Lots o' 6-gun kitridges."

"By heifers! Yuh knows what them is, I guess," the waddy snapped. "I wants shells fer me .45. Thar's a skunk hyarabouts what's been givin' me and my pards trouble. Jake Gleason may be hot stuff ter the home folks, but——"

"Gleason?" the old man gasped. "Now, stranger, this ain't none o' my business, of course, but if yuh'll jist take advice from a feller what's seen a heap, yuh'll let Gleason plumb alone. He—he jist about runs this country! He's slick and—and—waal, he ain't never lost out yit in nothin'."

Buck snorted. "Him? He ain't nuthin' but a bluff, thet polecat! Come on! Give me them shells! I got a notion ter go run him out o' his hole. Thet Cactus Club'd look like a herd o' longhorns has done stampeded through the place if I goes bustin' in thar."

The hard-boiled veteran jerked out his six-gun with the words. Buck hadn't meant to get involved with Gleason this trip, but mention of the crook had touched off his fiery temper. By heifers, he thought, it'd be a good stunt to make thet coyote take to the tall timber!

Buck glared and snorted so fiercely that the storekeeper fell over himself getting the ammunition. The veteran was using his .45 to hammer on the counter.

But suddenly it struck him that he had the old man scared by his

display of anger. Rather shamefaced, Buck put up his gun. He wasn't a bully in any way, even when spouting off the loudest.

Paying for his supplies, he loaded them into the buckboard. For a long moment then, he stood glowering at the Cactus Club. Billy West, he knew, wouldn't approve of his kicking up fresh trouble.

"Nope," the rough old-timer decided, "I guess I won't mop up on 'em to-day. If I wrecked the place, folks might think I was drunk. Thet wouldn't be no good example for Larry."

Gathering up the reins, he swung into the seat. The storekeeper, he saw, was watching him with anxious interest. Buck growled to himself:

"Thet ol' coot thinks I was jist runnin' off at the head." The thought made the veteran furious.

Yet he rattled out of town without another glance at the saloon. Buck firmly resolved now to keep out of trouble.

A keen wind from the mountains hit him as he rolled along the Big Bench. The air, all softness gone, had turned raw and nippy. Snow was coming, all right. Before he was halfway home, fine, cutting flakes were stinging his eyes and ears with the violence of a norther.

Buck whipped up the team. The rim of the Big Bench seemed to howl beneath that quick storm's sudden fury. Buck Foster looked, and shuddered.

"Dang! I'd hate ter go off thar in a blizzard!"

He shoved on the broncs. They, too, felt the lash of the storm. They covered ground at an eager gait, yet waddy and horses were chilled through and through before they reached the Shoe String.

Buck ran them under the shed, then grabbed up an armload of supplies and staggered to the house against the wind. Into the kitchen he plunged, with the storm howling about him.

Larry wasn't in sight. Buck kicked the door to and prepared to unload his groceries.

The next moment, though, he stopped stock-still, staring.

A half-emptied liquor bottle stood on the kitchen table. Four glasses, each containing a few remaining whisky drops, were ringed around it.

From the front room there came voices, the crackle of a fire, as the storm lulled for a moment.

"Go on, Sinton! Cut them cards. This time, I means ter top yuh."

"Yeah, kid, yuh cain't have all the luck all the time," a second voice growled. "I means ter git my money back. Ten dollars more says my high card beats yer."

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck grated through his few remaining teeth, "thet danged young cub has went back ter drink and gamblin'!"

The veteran strode angrily to the inner doorway. About a table, Larry and three crafty-looking jaspers were cutting cards, plainly for fairly high stakes.

Young Sinton's eyes were gleaming with that eager light of feverish excitement Buck had seen there when the youth bucked Gleason's crap game in the Cactus Club. The spell of the gambler once again was fastened hard upon him.

Buck Foster's lungs ripped forth a roar. Everybody whirled, for the noise of the storm had hid his sounds of entrance.

Larry flushed clear to the roots of his dark hair. Buck had caught him red-handed.

The others, however, broke into snarls at the interruption. Buck had never seen them before. He

had no means of knowing they were undercover hirelings of Gleason—cheap town toughs. He only knew that somehow they had coaxed Larry into blacksliding from his good intentions.

"Why, yuh dirty, low-down coyotes!" he bellowed. "What d'yuh mean, comin' in hyar and gittin' thet kid——"

"What's it ter yuh what we mean?" the biggest of the jaspers rasped at him. "Larry's old enough ter be his own boss, feller. If yuh come hornin' in hyar, I'll knock yore horns clean down past yore ears, yuh ugly has-been!"

"Yuh'll what?"

The insult was too much. Fuming with rage, Buck clawed for his six-gun. He was here to see that Larry trod the straight and narrow, and by heifers——

The toughs, liquor-inflamed, matched his move for quickness. Their guns came leaping forth. And Buck, in grabbing for his .45, had overlooked the fact that he was handicaped by an armful of groceries.

Tumbling cans hampered his draw. He hadn't quite expected to have to sling lead, but he realized, the next second, that he was in for real six-gun business.

A screaming slug ripped into the cans. Buck's face and eyes were plastered with tomato juice and pulp. For an instant, he could see nothing.

A second slug *zupped* past his ear. Buck, his gun clear now, went into action.

"Duck, Larry, yuh derned yearlin' idiot!" he howled. "I'm burnin' up them coyotes!"

The next second, the room rocked and roared and shuddered to the continuous boom of the hot-eyed veteran's weapon.

CHAPTER VII.

MORE SPY STUFF.

THE odds, which at first had appeared against Buck Foster, now swung swiftly in his favor. An armload of groceries had not been without advantage as a bulwark against the fire of the drink-befuddled enemy.

Buck, realizing his advantage, hugged the remaining tins closer to him with his left hand, while his right did furious duty with his six-gun.

In spite of his efforts to hold them, however, the cans were gradually falling, one by one, some spurting juices as they were hit by enemy slugs, others, dislocated, thudding with a plop to the floor, where they landed rolling.

Larry, at first taken aback by the sudden appearance of Buck and the unexpected fireworks, soon regained his self-possession. He mustn't let this big-hearted old-timer fight Larry Sinton's battles alone, he realized. Wasn't Buck doing this for him entirely?

Quickly the youth's hand darted down for his holster, only to come away empty. He had hung it on a peg in the kitchen, while he put dinner on to cook, of course. Desperately he cast about for something, anything, to use as a weapon against these lead-slinging jaspers.

Rolling cans caught his eye. Instantly he was gathering them up, hurling them both hard and well. One hombre dropped limply to the floor, much like an emptied sack. The remaining two were weaving in and out among chairs and tables now, trying vainly to dodge both six-gun slugs and the tin cans.

Buck Foster, already scarred from many battles, had a fresh nick on one ear, a thin trickle of red run-

ning down across an eyebrow. He was chewing the corner of his drooping mustache fiercely, as he bellowed:

"Yuh danged yaller-livers, I'll l'arn yuh how ter spoil all me good work, as soon's me back's turned! Take that—and that—and that!"

Slugs were flying about as fast as that angry old waddy could pull trigger and reload. Furious as he was, however, Buck didn't shoot to kill. These hombres' crimes weren't quite sufficient for that, he figured. But he sure meant to mark them up, make them sick of Larry and the Shoe String.

A second walloper went down from a crease along the scalp, out completely for the moment. The third hombre, his face a sickly green, yelled and lifted his hands, in token of surrender.

Instantly Buck ceased firing, and Larry his hurling of cans. Holstering his heated six-gun, Buck strode fiercely over to the surrendered jasper.

"Now yuh git!" he thundered. "And take them two skunks with yuh. And the next time yuh three wants ter drag a kid down ter yore level, pick on one what ain't got Buck Foster fer a guardian!"

The two hombres who had been out now scrambled groggily to their feet. A little uncertainly they all headed for the door. One turned, though, and snarled:

"Hombre, this is just another debt yuh owes Jake Gleason! Yuh'll pay fer this—yuh two and them other Montana smart Alecks!"

"Git goin', before I loses my temper!" Buck Foster snapped, and slammed the door upon them.

Before they were out of the ranch yard, however, Buck's wrath had turned on young Sinton.

Rolling his big pop eyes fiercely, he strode over to the youth. Grabbing him by the collar, he shook him as he might have shaken a small boy.

"Yuh—yuh—yuh dumb-bell! Yuh ain't worth savin'," he sputtered. "Fall flat the minute yuh clap eyes on a deck of cards or a bottle! Jest fer a little, I'd tell Billy to let yuh drink yoreself ter death. Yuh and yore good resolutions, bah!"

Larry sat down, shamefaced, midst the scattered remnants of the battle. Prunes, dried apples, half-emptied cans intermingled in a hodge-podge about the floor.

"I'm sorry, old-timer," he said dejectedly, dropping his head on his hands. "I didn't mean to, honest. But they come in here and went to passin' that bottle around amongst themselves. I got a whiff and—and——" His jaw hardened. "I'll be stronger next time."

Instantly Buck was all sympathy. "It wa'n't so much yore fault, I guess. It was jest them skunks what come hyar ter tempt yuh. We'll fergit it, and maybe I won't tell Billy."

"I don't deserve friends like you," Larry said, holding out his hand to Buck, "but shake, old-timer! I'm goin' to be a man hereafter."

From the light in Larry's eyes, Buck saw plainly that he meant it. Rough old horny hand met tanned young hand. Peace settled once more on the Shoe String.

Together they now set about to remove the scattered foodstuffs from the living room. New logs were thrown on the fireplace, the beans were again boiling on the kitchen stove. Larry, adding wood to the supper fire, turned quickly about as the kitchen door swung open.

Three Circle J pards, snow-covered, stood in the doorway, grinning.

"Supper ready?" Joe Scott called in a cheerful voice.

"Yep, by the time yuh all get thawed out some," Larry replied, smiling happily as he pumped the hand of each in turn. "Gee! It's good to see yuh all," he ejaculated.

"Good to be back, but where's Buck?" Billy inquired.

Larry grinned sheepishly. "Livin' room," he said, flushing.

Buck, still busy with his cleaning-up job, hadn't heard his pards come in. Joe Scott's wild whoop was the first intimation he had of their return.

"Help me, Hannah!" Joe mocked. "I allus knowed thet old crowbait was an ol' woman. All he needs is a dress. Look, boss!"

Joe's laughter was catching. Neither Billy nor Sing Lo could resist it. Buck, crawling about the floor on hands and knees, seemed absorbed in sorting prunes from among dried apples, all of which were soaked in what looked like canned tomatoes.

Neat little piles of foodstuffs lay about, waiting to be picked up later.

Caught now in what always before he would have called woman's work, the veteran looked up foolishly.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad if I see what yo're a-laughin' at," he growled angrily, jerking his mustache vigorously, while he got stiffly to his feet.

Billy West, straightening his face with an effort, choked. "Tornado, or explosion, Buck?"

Buck's chest expanded until the buttons on his prized bearskin vest threatened to pop off.

"I reckon them three 7 Bar toughs'd say it was a tornado!" he bragged proudly.

Then, in his customary gruff manner, he told his pards what had happened, glossing over, as much as possible, Larry's misdeeds. Larry, standing quietly by, looked at him gratefully.

Billy West wasn't fooled, however.

"Hm-m-m, I kind o' figgered Gleason'd try somethin' like thet," he said slowly. "He thinks by draggin' Larry down, he can still get the Shoe String, even if he did lose the cow herd. But thet's all taken care of; everything's jake now," he said, patting Larry's shoulder reassuringly.

Young Sinton's expression showed his complete lack of understanding. True, Billy had taken his cattle and paid the note on them. But there was still Gleason's note on the ranch, which Larry couldn't pay. And if he could, he'd have no cattle.

His thoughts were going around in circles.

"Well, fer the love o' Pete, let's eat," Joe Scott grunted, "I'm as hungry as a timber wolf." He headed for the kitchen.

The others trooped after him. Little was said about the subject which was uppermost in Larry's mind, until the meal was over. Then Billy explained what he had done since he'd left the Shoe String.

"Just took yore cows across the mountains," he said modestly, "and sold 'em for what they was really worth. Then we took the cash, scouted around, and picked up critters thet ranchers let go cheap because they needed money. Got nearly twice as many. They're out there now—the Shoe String's new herd—in the corral, lad."

"But—but what—how—the Shoe String's new herd?" Larry didn't understand. "*Yore* stuff, not mine, West!"

Billy shook his head. "Nope. Just

a little business deal I swung for yuh. To-morrow, we'll drive 'em to Mañana, ship to Denver. At present market prices, they'll pay off Gleason—and me. Then, yore ranch clear, yuh can borrow money from the bank to restock. Pretty simple, eh?" He smiled at the young rancher.

Larry's eyes were wide with admiration and excitement.

"Say, yo're a wiz!" he cried. "Why couldn't I have thought o' somethin' like thet? By gosh! It just shows there's more to ranchin' than——"

"Mistlee Billy! Mistlee Billy! Lookee window, quick!" Sing Lo, pouring another round of coffee, shrieked the words, at the same time jabbing an excited yellow finger toward the kitchen window. The little chink's slant eyes were round and staring.

The others shot quick glances in the direction indicated. An evil, leering face—its owner suddenly conscious that he'd been discovered—was just disappearing. Running feet pounded outside.

Overturning chairs in their excitement, all hands poured confusedly out of the doorway. That jasper was a spy, they felt certain.

The snort of a horse as it was kicked viciously, a savage oath, and a rider vanished in the night, just as the waddies raced around a corner of the ranch house.

Buck Foster was roaring: "Spyin' on us ag'in, the dirty varmints! I'll make 'em pay fer thet! I'll git me horse and ride 'im down! I'll——"

Billy's cool voice restored him to normal, however.

"Yuh'll come on back in the house and act like yuh had some sense," he said.

Buck went. Billy knew there was no chance to overtake that rider.

"Well, Gleason'll soon know as much about thet cattle deal as we do," the boss of Circle J said grimly, when they were once more inside. "We'll never make it to Mañana now without a fight, I reckon."

Joe Scott, weary from long hours in the saddle, grinned sleepily. "Huh! About ten hours' shut-eye'll be all I needs ter mow down my share o' them skunks, boss."

Buck growled. "Me, too, dang 'em!"

Larry, though, looked worried. "Well, if we do have trouble," he said, "I shore hope it won't be on the Big Bench. Thet'd be one mighty ticklish place to fight off gun hands and still try to keep cattle from stampedin' over the rim. Why, even in thet little skirmish we had the other day, the herd was headin' thet way!"

Billy West said nothing, but he, too, thought as Larry did. The Big Bench, with its sharp, sheer drop, could wipe out a herd in no time.

CHAPTER VIII.

OUT OF THE STORM.

A TENSE air of expectancy hung over the Shoe String before daylight the next morning.

All were up busy with their various duties, in a quiet, methodical manner. The usual banter between Buck and Joe was missing. Even Sing Lo, who ordinarily amused himself while in the kitchen with songs in his native tongue, was strangely quiet.

So much hung on getting the cattle safely to Mañana. Billy's money, tied up in this herd, would be lost, Larry's hopes of retaining his ranch completely crushed, should Gleason succeed in keeping the cattle from the railroad.

Sing Lo's usual good food was

gulped, and steaming coffee downed unappreciatively. The same thought was uppermost in every mind—to get under way at once, face this thing, and get it over.

The storm, which the day before had promised to reach blizzard intensity, had lulled during the night. The wind had dropped, the snowfall ceased.

The waddies took that for a good sign, but for a short time only. Soon dawn, gray and hushed and breathless, crept over the peaks with that soft, unusual hover of pressure which tells of more storm to come. And this time, the pards feared that when it came, it might strike with a vengeance.

Quickly the herd was got under way. Joe Scott rode with Larry at drag. Billy and Buck were ahead, at point. Sing Lo stuck close beside them.

The cattle would have to be hazed on slowly, all realized, for they were already gaunt from their previous drive across the mountains. Hardly had they left the corrals when the first thin flake of snow came spiraling out of the grayness, followed by another, and another.

"If this keeps up," Larry muttered sadly, "it'll make it harder'n ever to sight thet mangy coyote and his gang, if they do try to pull a sneak on us."

The storm, ever increasing, picked up a keener edge, with a sharp wind blowing down from the north. Snow danced in gusts of fury. The gray daylight darkened, cut down the range of vision for man and horse and cow brute.

Against the pelting blast, the herd moved on at a pace that was stiff and sluggish. Each waddy, shoulders hunched, head ducked low in his mackinaw collar, rode shivering. Although they could see no more than twenty feet in any direction, every sense was keen, alert.

The day wore on endlessly, it seemed. The storm showed no signs of abating. These New Mexico northers were raw, bitter. Hands, numb from the cold, were beaten together or removed from gloves to blow a warmer breath of air upon them.

Would they never reach and pass that dreaded rim? So cold and numb had they all become that they now imagined they longed for a fight. Anything to break this monotonous plodding on and on and on.

Darkness would come early on a day like this. Even now, it seemed approaching. Finally the Big Bench was reached; part of the herd had been guided warily past the most dangerous spot.

Larry—eyelids heavy from the sting of the storm, weariness and suspense and worry in every line of his face—spoke thickly to Joe:

"Well, they're half across, anyhow. I thought——"

Crack! A shot rang out from behind a boulder.

The nearest cow dropped in her tracks. Larry's sentence ended in a groan of despair.

Shots now ripped out from all about the rim. Immediately the herd, which had dragged so sluggishly throughout the day, became wild-eyed, alert.

Every cow seemed to have but a single thought—to get away from those shots as quickly as possible.

Bellowing their fright, they tumbled over one another in their haste. Billy and Buck had whirled and were working frantically. Even Buck, old fire eater that he was, realized that this was no time for six-gun business.

Those cattle must be herded in

the right direction, pronto—away from that mighty rim's drop.

All was confusion. Slickers waved, cattle bawled, yelling foes flung hot slugs that glanced and screamed from boulders.

Half hidden by the swirling storm, Jake Gleason's riders seemed everywhere about the stampeding turmoil.

Joe and Larry, back at drag, had no chance to get between the flying herd and the dreaded cliff. The attack had been too sudden.

The redhead shrilled out fiercely: "Tear into them polecats, Larry! Thet's how we kin help best. Give 'em 'Hail, Columbia'!"

He was spurring straight toward gun flashes as the shout rang from him. Larry followed his lead. In other instant, Barb Hemsley and part of the foe found that they had their hands full.

The rest, however, charged down upon the terrified cow brutes. The Big Bench shook with the pound of hoofs. Billy, Buck, and now Sing Lo strove to turn the fear-crazed welter.

Shots ripped about the waddies. The snow-screened rim was coming closer.

But desperate skill and daring were having their effect. The cattle weren't running straight now; they were thundering on at an angle. A little more, and they could be swung into the right direction.

But if they weren't—— Billy shuddered at the thought. He and his two pards would be swept from the bench in an avalanche of flesh and bone, crushed beneath tons of crashing, broken cattle.

"Hurry, Buck, hurry!" he yelled. "We've almost got 'em goin'!"

The words ended with a gasp of dismay. From up front, riders were plowing in to block the way.

The cattle swerved again. Six-guns blazed viciously across their front. The pards were caught, the cattle doomed, unless something was done instantly to beat back the peril.

And Sing Lo—of all persons—did it. Jake Gleason's form had loomed up ahead among the triumphant riders. Buck flung a shot at him that barely missed. Gleason flamed back lead upon the instant.

The gambler had two guns. But the one in his right hand spoke only once. Billy West's quick slug tore it from his fingers. Gleason cried out in pain, his other weapon forgotten for the moment.

And in that moment, Sing Lo acted. Quivering with terror as the herd's mighty press rolled his way, the little Oriental jerked a round object from his pocket.

Quickly he yanked off a glove and snapped a match into life on the only dry thing available—his thumb nail.

The flame leaped to a tiny fuse. Sputtering, the round object left Sing Lo's hand in a wild fling toward the faces of the charging cattle.

The storm's murk bust into blinding red light, a tremendous, dazzling flare, as if the earth there had ripped asunder above a raging furnace.

CHAPTER IX.

OVER THE RIM.

THE cow brutes' eyes rolled in fresh and greater terror. Their turn was sharp and sudden. Away from that weird light they streaked, hard now toward Gleason and his punchers.

"Good work, Sing Lo!" Billy shrilled out his delight.

The young owner of Circle J had understood in a flash. The little chink had hurled one of the brilliant

red-powder bombs he carried for sleight-of-hand stunts.

Gleason's hombres tried to flee from the mighty wave of cattle—all but Gleason himself.

That hombre, dumfounded for a moment, was swearing insanely and flinging lead in wild shots toward the herd now almost upon him.

In a second more, he was cut off. His horse whirled, with a scream. Gleason, too, was screaming.

The onrush had forced them toward the rim. The abyss yawned beside them.

Suddenly a rangy beast, more maddened than the rest, spun from the rush that swept along the rim, and headed straight for Gleason. A great horned head smashed into his horse's flank before the desperate gambler could realize what was happening.

With a squeal of pain and terror, the cayuse lurched along the rim. A hind foot slipped from rock slick with fallen snow; a hoof shot down and over.

Snorting and struggling for footing, the frightened animal might yet have made it, had not the crazed cow brute charged again.

Instantly a six-gun shot rang from Billy. Gleason's schemes had failed. Billy's effort to save even that crook from death was instinctive.

His slug plowed into the steer. But already the infuriated animal had rammed headlong into the horse with a force that no cayuse, no matter how sure-footed, could withstand.

An agonized cry from Gleason—a shriek from the upended horse—a hoarse bellow from the steer—and all three were plunging downward over the rim.

A sickening crash, followed by dislodged boulders and sliding snow, told the pards atop the rim that Jake Gleason's treacherous stampede had been his last one.

The herd swept along the rim. Other foes were down and done for, as the Shoe String stock churned on in a rush that carried the poor brutes to safety.

Joe and Larry, red-smeared from numerous bullet nicks and creases, but quite evidently pleased with themselves, now spurred quickly toward the cattle.

They could see that their pards were safe, the battle ended.

Soon the combined efforts of the Circle J men and Larry had the spent herd milling. Now that there was no further danger in their path past the rim, the brutes were easily quieted.

Stolidly the last cow jogged past the dreaded drop at its most dangerous point. Only one had gone over the rim. A few had fallen from gun shots, but the bulk had been saved, thanks to Sing Lo's clever trick and good cow work on the part of Buck and Billy.

The grizzled veteran was fuming, though, to no one in particular:

"Thet danged chink and the redhead had ter cop off all the excitement. I never got ter shoot a single skunk, or nothin'!"

"Huh! Yuh and Billy didn't do so bad yoreselves," Joe Scott responded cheerfully. "Yore job was the big one."

"Say, where's the rest of the gang?" Billy West wanted to know. "Them thet was fightin' Joe and Larry?"

Young Sinton grinned for the first time that day, and answered:

"Well, Hemsley and Ringo ain't goin' to fight no more, ever. The other three are all tied up tight behind a nice, sheltered boulder, tryin' to keep from freezin' to death, I reckon."

"Yeah," Joe chuckled, "but them jaspers are so plumb hot inside thet it's goin' ter be quite a spell before they cool off, even."

"Then we'll all slide down to where Gleason landed, and see what can be done," Billy West said.

After much slipping and scrambling, the pards reached the bottom. A faint moan came from Gleason as they neared his side. He lay in a broken heap, yet consciousness seemed to be returning.

Billy gently pressed his canteen to the injured man's lips. He drank greedily. His eyes opened slowly, passed from one face to another. Finally they rested on Larry, for whom they had apparently been searching.

"Larry," he murmured weakly.

Larry was at his side at once, wrongs forgotten. Gleason apparently was done for.

The gambler was speaking now. His words came with a rush. He seemed afraid he wouldn't have time enough to say it all.

"I put mesquite thorn under your dad's saddle blanket that day at round-up—cut the cinch—so saddle would slip. Always wanted Shoe String—almost got it, too."

He was gasping for breath now; still, determination kept him alive. "Stole yore cattle regular, boy. Owe yuh more'n the amount of yore note. No reason for you to pay it, nohow. This—is where—my danged—greed got me!"

His eyes closed. One long, last gasp, and he was gone forever.

A new light came into Larry's eyes. He was understanding many things now. He rose slowly and stood at his full height. His broad shoulders straightened.

"The Shoe String mine—for good! And I owe it all to yuh, West—you and Circle J." His hand went out to the grinning pards. Larry Sinton looked all man now.

Shown the way, he could carry on, Billy knew. Their time had not been wasted.

Waal, now wa'n't thet jest like Sing Lo? Thet little chink kin always be counted on ter bob up whar he's least expected, an' with somethin' thet the bad hombres buckin' Circle J wa'n't expectin', neither. An' thet's why Billy West always takes the chink on his adventure trails with him. Watch fer them Circle J pards ter be burnin' leather an' slingin' lead ag'in soon. They'll do it in the next story about 'em in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

Taming The Thunder Bird

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

By Lee Harrington

Author of
"The Cache At Dripping Springs," etc.

SQUATTED around a blazing fire that hurled red flames into the black night, a dozen heavily armed men were frying bacon and cooking frying-pan bread as they waited for the gray dawn to reveal the trail to Thunderbolt City.

Seated on a log apart from his crew of cutthroats, the "Thunder Bird" himself—the most feared desperado in all that wild mountain range—shoveled the last of his food into his wide mouth. Then he guzzled his coffee and wiped his flaming red beard with the back of a hand like a gorilla's.

He rose slowly to his feet. With his short, thick legs set wide apart, he stood glowering at the gang of desperadoes whom he had brought into the mountains.

Less than five feet in height, but with immense shoulders and an enormous chest, the Thunder Bird possessed the strength of several ordinary men. His long arms, ending in hands which almost touched his knees, made him look more like an ape than a man. His yellowish eyes were deep-set beneath shaggy brows, flamed with devilish cruelty.

Resting his hands on his powerful hips, the hideous dwarf outlaw tipped back his head and looked up at the sky, in which the paling stars were beginning to advertise the slow approach of a winter dawn. For a

long moment, the dwarf stood glaring at the sky, then suddenly he whirled on his watching men.

"Load everything on the sleds," he barked. "It'll be daylight in an hour."

Jabbering excitedly, the outlaws began to load the camp equipment on two sleds which stood at a little distance from the fire. Four men harnessed and hitched up the dog teams, which had been tied to trees during the night.

When all was ready for a start, the Thunder Bird raised a hand to attract attention. Standing with his back to the fire, he gave his orders to the scowling crew.

As the last word fell from the hairy lips of the outlaw chief, each man picked up his rifle. One by one, the desperadoes fell into single file, until only the dog drivers were left standing beside their sleds.

Turning to the dog drivers, the Thunder Bird growled a short order:

"As soon as we get the citizens of Thunderbolt locked up, boys, drive the sleds into town. One team will stop in front of the store. The other will halt in front of the bank."

To the rest of the desperadoes, the outlaw chief spoke a few words:

"If any man in Thunderbolt offers resistance, show him no mercy."

A muttered growl of assent was followed by the crunching of the outlaws' big-web snowshoes. Led by the Thunder Bird, the desperate gang filed down the mountain toward the sleeping town.

Reaching the old mining camp, the Thunder Bird divided his gang. Some of the men he sent to round up the old-timers who occupied the cabins; others he ordered to force their way into "Cheerful Johnny's" hotel and seize and bind him and his Chinese cook. The rest were to visit the store and take the storekeeper prisoner.

Accompanied by two men, the outlaw chief went to the house of Sheriff Grant and pounded heavily at the door.

A light gleamed through the window of the house, and a man shouted:

"Who is there, and what in tarnation do you want at this hour of night?"

"It is Jim Hazel, the forest ranger," lied the Thunder Bird, imitating as well as he could the voice of the ranger he knew so well. "Hurry up, sheriff! The Thunder Bird and a dozen men are raiding the camp!"

A muttered exclamation in the sheriff's voice was followed by the sound of footsteps coming toward the door. It swung back, and the sheriff stood staring into the muzzle of a six-gun held in the Thunder Bird's hand.

"Stick 'em up, sheriff," barked the outlaw, "or I'll drop yuh in yore tracks!"

Brave to a fault, the sheriff tried to slam the door in the outlaw's face. But he was not quick enough. A streak of orange flame darted from the muzzle of the outlaw's six-gun, and the roar of the .45 smashed against the silence.

With hands flung forward, the sheriff fell dead across the threshold of his own home.

Spurning the dead body of the officer with his foot, the Thunder Bird entered the house, followed by his two men.

"Grab all the guns and ammunition you can find," growled the outlaw chief. "We ain't goin' to leave a weapon in camp."

Ten minutes later, the Thunder Bird entered the hotel. Cheerful Johnny—the three-hundred-and-six-

teen-pound proprietor—and Sam Kee, his Chinese cook, lay trussed on the office floor.

"Any trouble, boys?" asked the outlaw chief.

"Bet yore life," growled a desperado. "That fat slob managed to reach the telephone. He called up the Thunder River ranger station, before I cracked him over the head with my gun."

With a muttered oath, the Thunder Bird drove the toe of his foot into Cheerful Johnny's ribs, and the fat man came to himself with a groan.

"What did yuh tell the ranger?" barked the outlaw chief. "Speak quick, or I'll plug yuh!"

"I told Jimmy you was raiding this here camp," muttered Cheerful Johnny. Then he relapsed into unconsciousness.

Leaving Cheerful Johnny and the cook bound, the Thunder Bird stepped to the door. It was daylight, and the citizens of Thunderbolt were coming down the street, herded by armed outlaws.

"Bring 'em in here, boys!" bawled the Thunder Bird.

When the unarmed captives stood before him in the office of Cheerful Johnny's hotel, the outlaw chief ordered them bound hand and foot. Leaving every man in Thunderbolt, except the cashier of the bank, bound and locked in the hotel, the Thunder Bird and his men broke into the bank.

There, under a threat of instant death, the white-faced cashier was forced to open the vault, from which the outlaws stole all the currency and gold.

Having raided the bank, the bandits bound the cashier and locked him inside the building. Then they raided the store for food, ammunition, and other supplies. Three hours after they had entered the camp, the outlaws were on their way up the Thunder River trail.

Ten miles from Thunderbolt, the outlaw chief called a halt. Picking out two of the most desperate-looking men in his gang, he ordered them to go a few miles farther up the trail and conceal themselves among the rocks.

"Jim Hazel, the ranger," explained the outlaw chief, "will be heading this way. I want yuh to ambush him and take him prisoner. Bring him to Thunder Peak, where we'll build a new hang-out. And mind yuh, boys, I want that ranger alive."

"O. K., chief," growled "Two-gun" Kester—a burly fellow with mean eyes and a scarred face. "We'll bring the ranger in."

"Slick" Janson hitched up his belt and spat into the snow. His pale eyes glittered like a snake's as he met the savage gaze of the Thunder Bird.

"We get yuh, chief," he said in a thin, reedy voice. "Yuh want the ranger alive."

Ordering his dog drivers to turn their teams up a narrow gulch which came down to meet the Thunder River trail, the outlaw chief paused a moment to utter one last harsh warning:

"Don't come to camp without the ranger, yuh two fellows, or yuh'll answer for it with yore lives!"

Left alone, Two-gun Kester and Slick Janson stood watching the dog teams until they had disappeared; then the two desperadoes hurried up the Thunder River trail. A mile above where they had left the gang, they concealed themselves among the rocks. An hour later, the jingling of sleigh bells advertised the approach of Jim Hazel, the forest ranger.

II.

Without the least suspicion of being ambushed, Jim Hazel was covering the ground with long, rapid strides as, with one hand on the gee-pole, he urged his team down the Thunder River trail.

Suddenly the lead dog slackened speed, as its keen nostrils caught the scent of the ambushed outlaws. Unable to check itself, the next dog piled on top of the leader, and the two animals went down in a snarling tangle of teeth and paws.

Two rifle shots rang out, the bullets whistled above Jim Hazel's head as he hurried to stop the fighting dogs. Leaping from behind their rocks, Two-gun Kester and Slick Janson covered the ranger with their rifles.

"Hands up!" yelled Two-gun Kester. "Yuh ain't got a chance."

Jim Hazel's right hand whipped his six-gun from his belt, even as he dropped to a crouching position behind the dogs. At the crack of the ranger's weapon, Two-gun Kester pitched face forward into the trail.

Yelling defiance, Slick Janson was taking steady aim at the crouching ranger when Jim Hazel's six-gun spoke a second time. Struck by the forest ranger's bullet, the rifle was snatched from the outlaw's grasp.

Cowering in sudden fear of death, the desperado raised both hands above his head.

"Don't kill me, ranger!" he whined. "We was jest carryin' out the chief's orders. He said to take yuh alive."

Blue eyes blazing with anger, Jim Hazel strode toward the outlaw and covered him with his six-gun.

"Toss your weapon into the trail," snapped the ranger, "and put your hands behind your back."

Whining with fear, the outlaw obeyed, and Jim Hazel snapped handcuffs on his wrists. Then the ranger herded his prisoner into the trail and fastened a rope from his belt to the rear of the sled.

Paying no more attention to the desperado, Jim Hazel stooped over the body of Two-gun Kester. A bullet hole between the outlaw's eyes bore witness to the accuracy of the ranger's aim.

Picking up the body of the desperado in his powerful arms, Jim Hazel laid it on the sled and lashed it securely. Then the ranger spoke to his dogs. With Jim Hazel at the gee-pole, and Slick Jansen running behind the sled, the team sped on its way toward Thunderbolt City.

A few hours later, Jim Hazel halted his team in front of Cheerful Johnny's hotel. Leaving his handcuffed prisoner hitched to the sled, the ranger burst into the office. Snatching his hunting knife from his belt, Jim Hazel freed the men who had been trussed up by the outlaws.

Paying little attention to the furious shouts of the outraged old-timers, the ranger told Cheerful Johnny to set the cook to preparing a meal. Then suddenly Jim Hazel missed the sheriff.

The ranger's blue eyes grew cold with anger when he heard of the murder of Sheriff Grant. Then he turned on the chattering crowd.

"Get together all the weapons you can find, boys," said Jim Hazel. "I'll need every man I can get to help me round up the Thunder Bird and his gang. I have an idea that the outlaws will fight to a finish."

As the old-timers followed Jim Hazel out of the hotel, they saw the desperado hitched to the sled, and a howl of anger rose.

"Get a rope!" yelled one man.

"Hang the danged, dirty murderer!" growled another.

Two or three men rushed forward to lay violent hands on the terrified desperado, but Jim Hazel stepped in front of his prisoner.

"No violence, boys!" said the young ranger sternly. "Take him over to the jail and lock him up. He'll be safe there until we get back."

After sending two men to break open the front door of the bank and free the cashier, whose plight some one had mentioned, Jim Hazel stepped back into the hotel.

Snatching the telephone receiver off its hook, the ranger called up his old friends, the three Tigor brothers, of Gunsight Lake, to whom he had previously telephoned the news of the raid from the Thunder River ranger station.

Bill Tigor, eldest of the three brothers, answered the phone.

"We got track of the gang, as yuh told us to do, Jimmy," drawled the mountaineer. "The Thunder Bird, his dog teams, and ten heavily armed men are headin' for the old outlaw hang-out on Thunder Peak."

"Stay at your cabin until I reach there," snapped Jim Hazel. "I'm bringing with me every man who is able to rustle a gun. And, Bill, don't go to acting foolish and tackle the gang without a posse."

"Yuh don't need to worry none, Jimmy," came Bill Tigor's drawling voice. "We'll wait until yuh get hyar, as the wild bees remarked when they saw the bear."

Search of the camp revealed that the outlaws had stolen all but two guns. One of those the Thunder Bird had failed to find was an ancient .45 single-action Colt, which Cheerful Johnny had hidden beneath his mattress. The other belonged to Sam Kee, the Chinese cook. Strangely enough, the cook's weapon was a .45 automatic pistol.

"Heap fine gun," explained Sam Kee. "Him hold nine bullet."

"You'll need every one of 'em, if you meet the Thunder Bird," said Jim Hazel grimly. "He seems to have as many lives at a cat."

Finding themselves without weapons, the old-timers showed an eagerness to accompany Jim Hazel. Both Cheerful Johnny and the Chinese cook refused to give up their guns to any one else.

"I'm gettin' too fat, anyway, Jimmy," remarked Cheerful Johnny, "What I crave is a little exercise, and, by heck, I'm goin' along!"

"I go 'long, too, langer," twittered the Chinese cook. "Him Thunder Bird allee same become ancestor, when Sam Kee shoot him nine time."

Finding that nothing short of force could keep Cheerful Johnny and Sam Kee from going with him, Jim Hazel gave in.

"If you play out on the trail, Johnny, don't expect me to wait for you," warned the ranger.

But Cheerful Johnny insisted on going. With his mackinaw buttoned up around his chin, his old .45 strapped around his bulging stomach, and the brim of his hat tied down over his ears, he clumped along behind the sled.

Panting and puffing, with sweat streaming down his hairless red face, he looked like a gigantic farmer's wife as he plodded through the white wilderness. Behind Cheerful Johnny, the Chinese cook waddled along on wide-spraddled legs, like some mad heathen god turned loose in the Thunder Bird Range.

At noon, they found the trail of the outlaw gang, and followed it until they reached a small flat where the Thunder Bird had halted his men to eat.

The outlaws' camp fire was still

burning, and Jim Hazel ordered the Chinese to make coffee and fry bacon. Slumping down on a log, Cheerful Johnny removed his snowshoes and three pairs of socks. With gloomy eyes, he stared at the raw welts made by the snowshoe thongs across his toes.

"I hadn't ought to have come along, Jimmy," groaned the fat man. "My pore toes are danged near sawed off. I'll be clubfooted, afore we reach Gunsight Lake."

Sam Kee's eyes gleamed, as he flashed Cheerful Johnny a heathen grin.

"All samee fat pig," twittered the Chinese. "You heap savvy squeal."

"Why, you yellow-faced monkey!" exploded Cheerful Johnny.

"Shut up and listen," snapped Jim Hazel. "Isn't that the sound of guns?"

Crack-crack-crack! Three shots rang out. They were followed by two more. Then came silence.

Leaping to his feet, Jim Hazel gulped his scalding coffee, then threw down his cup and whirled.

"Those shots came from the direction of Gunsight Lake," said the ranger. "You stay here with the dog team and sled, Johnny; Sam Kee and I will go see what's wrong."

Paying no attention to Cheerful Johnny's protests, Jim Hazel tied on his snowshoes and snatched up his rifle. Setting a pace which soon left the Chinese far behind, the ranger strode along the well-beaten trail left by the outlaws. Suddenly the trail forked, and Jim Hazel stopped until Sam Kee joined him.

"Most of the outlaws have headed toward Thunder Peak," said the ranger, "but here are the tracks of four men pointing toward Gunsight Lake."

"Thunder Bird, him heap plenty smart," said the Chinese. "He send men to kill Tigor boys and catchum more glub."

III.

A volley of shots crashed against the silence, and Jim Hazel broke into a run on his snowshoes. When Sam Kee caught up with the ranger, Jim Hazel was crouched in the snow with the barrel of his rifle lying across a log. Silent for once, the Chinese squatted down beside the ranger.

A hundred yards away, the two men could see the Tigor boys' cabin. As they watched, a rifle cracked sharply. Snow spurted into Jim Hazel's face as a bullet thudded into the log behind which the ranger was crouching.

Ducking below his log, Jim Hazel snorted in disgust.

"One of the Tigor boys caught sight of us," said the ranger. "They think we are outlaws."

The rifle shot was followed by a scattering volley from all sides of the cabin, and a storm of bullets thudded into its walls. Searching the timber with his eyes, Jim Hazel caught sight of an outlaw peering from behind a tree. Taking steady aim, the ranger fired, and the man pitched face forward and lay writhing in the snow.

Instantly a yell of fury rose from the ambushed outlaws, and bullets kicked up the snow around Jim Hazel and the Chinese.

Unable to contain his excitement, and knowing that his automatic was useless at long range, Sam Kee leaped to his feet. Yelling like a fiend, he plunged toward the ambushed outlaws. He had taken only a few steps when, struck by three bullets, he pitched face forward into the snow.

Stepping into the open, three outlaws began to pump lead at the prone body of the Chinese.

Whipping his rifle to his shoulder, Jim Hazel fired twice, and two of the desperadoes went down. Then the last outlaw fired, and Jim Hazel dropped in his tracks, with crimson slowly oozing into the snow from a bullet graze on the side of his head.

The cabin door opened and, guns in hand, the three Tigor boys leaped into the open. Before they could fire, the surviving outlaw had fled into the timber. The silence of death settled down on Gunsight Lake.

Jim Hazel opened his eyes, to find himself lying in a bunk in the Tigor boys' cabin. Young Gabe was stooping over him, with a cup of water in his hand.

"How are yur feelin', Jimmy?" asked the hawk-faced young mountaineer.

"I'm all right," muttered Jim Hazel. Sitting up, he placed both hands to his throbbing head. Then he glanced around the cabin.

"Where are Bill and Curt?" asked the ranger.

"Gone to trail down the last of the gang, Jimmy," replied young Gabe. "And when they ketch him, they ain't agoin' to show him no mercy."

Jim Hazel clambered out of the bunk. He would have fallen from dizziness, had not Gabe thrown an arm around his shoulders.

"Last of the gang be hanged!" exclaimed the ranger. "The Thunder Bird and the rest of his men have headed toward Thunder Peak."

Wounded though he was, Jim Hazel insisted on taking the trail of Bill and Curt Tigor at once, in spite of young Gabe's protests.

"The desperado who got away will probably do his best to lure your brothers into a trap," explained the ranger, "and after losing so many men, the Thunder Bird would show Bill and Curt little mercy."

A quavering yell outside the cabin caused Jim Hazel to draw his six-gun and hurry to the door. Cheerful Johnny was driving the dog team out of the timber toward the cabin.

Suddenly the dogs stopped at a word from the fat man. Using only one hand, Cheerful Johnny picked up the body of the Chinese cook by the belt and laid him on the sled.

"Mush, you danged polecats!" shouted Cheerful Johnny. And the dogs broke into a trot which lasted until they reached the cabin.

"I told you to stay with the sled," said Jim Hazel.

"Which same I did, Jimmy," retorted the fat man. "That's why I'm hyar."

Cheerful Johnny carried Sam Kee into the cabin and laid him on the bunk.

"See what you can do for him, Jimmy," requested the fat man. "Sam Kee ain't dead yet, and I need him for a cook."

Quick examination showed that, although seriously wounded by three bullets, the Chinese stood a fair chance of recovery. So Jim Hazel administered first aid, and left him in charge of Cheerful Johnny.

Leaving the dog team at the cabin, Jim Hazel and young Gabe Tigor started on the trail of Bill and Curt. At sunset, they found the mountaineers sitting beside a camp fire ten miles from Gunsight Lake.

"Hello, Jimmy!" drawled Bill Tigor. "Lookin' for some one, or jest travelin'?"

"What became of that desperado

whom you were trailing?" asked the ranger.

Bill Tigor pulled at the end of his drooping black mustache, and made a sidewise motion with his head.

"He's layin' over yander, Jimmy," drawled the mountaineer. "Seems like he's daid, as the feller said when he shot the possum."

Looking as stern as possible, Jim Hazel examined the outlaw. A bullet had left a small round hole in his forehead, and there was a crimson stain on his shirt, just over the heart.

"Did you boys kill him?" asked Jim Hazel upon his return to the fire.

"We gave the danged varmint a chance to beat us to the draw," replied Curt. "But——"

"He kind o' fumbled his gun," drawled Bill, "which is the reason for him being daid."

Jim Hazel stood a moment, gazing into the leaping yellow flames of the fire; then a sigh escaped his lips.

"One outlaw in jail and one dead in Thunderbolt makes two," said the forest ranger. "Three killed in the fight at Gunsight Lake makes five, and that one over there makes six. Boys, the Thunder Bird and the other six of his gang have probably reached Thunder Peak by now. It's up to us to bring them in."

"Which same we can do, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor. "We'll sneak up on them desperadoes while they're asleep, as the wolves remarked when they saw the woollies."

Moonrise found Jim Hazel and the three Tigor boys standing among the timber at the foot of Thunder Peak. Far above them, the yellow glare of a fire advertised that the Thunder Bird had pitched camp for the night.

After watching the glare of the fire for a few minutes, Jim Hazel ordered Curt and young Gabe Tigor to go around the base of the mountain and approach the other side.

"Bill and I will climb toward the fire from this side," said the ranger. "When we get within pistol shot, Bill will imitate the cry of an owl. At the signal, we'll step into the open and call upon the Thunder Bird to surrender."

"Suppose the Thunder Bird don't see things that way, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor.

"Then we'll have to fight it out," said Jim Hazel grimly. "If the outlaws choose to fight, show them no mercy, boys. But don't fire the first shot."

Curt and young Gabe started around the base of the mountain, and Jim Hazel and Bill began to clamber upward, picking their way among the rocky crags of Thunder Peak. As they climbed, their backs were toward the moon, so that they were following their own shadows up the side of the mountain.

For a little while, the only sounds were the crunching of the climbers' snowshoes; but presently wolves began to howl in the far distance. From among the rocks, now and again, an owl uttered its weird call.

When they had reached a point about three hundred feet above the base of the mountain, Jim Hazel called a halt.

"We had better give Curt and young Gabe a chance to catch up," said the ranger. "They had much farther to go than we had."

Sitting down with their backs against a huge rock, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor talked in low tones.

"Seems like the only way to get rid of the Thunder Bird is to kill him," drawled Bill Tigor. "He's escaped every time he's been thrown

into jail. Yuh hadn't ought to show him no mercy, Jimmy, if yuh get the drop on him to-night."

Not caring to argue with the mountaineer, Jim Hazel rose to his feet and led the way up Thunder Peak. High above them, they plainly could see the yellow glow cast by the outlaw's fire.

IV.

Ten minutes later, Jim Hazel and bill Tigor reached a stone wall which, years before, outlaws had built around the flat that formed the summit of Thunder Peak. Following the wall, they came at last to the ruins of a gateway through which the desperadoes had passed on their way to their old hangout on the summit of the mountain.

Passing through the gateway, Jim Hazel led the way toward a huge pile of snow-covered rocks which had once been a building. There the ranger called a halt. He and Bill Tigor removed their webs, for the winds had swept the barren summit almost clear of snow.

Rifles in hand, and six-guns worn well to the front of their hips, Jim Hazel and big Bill Tigor cautiously stole from ruin to ruin in the direction of the outlaws' fire. Presently they reached a position from which they could see it burning in the bottom of an old cellar.

Squatted around the fire, the desperadoes were cooking a meal. Apart from his men, the Thunder Bird himself sat hunched over on a rock. His great beard shone red, and his eyes gleamed fiercely as he glowered at the leaping flames.

Beyond the fire, Jim Hazel could see the ruins of another building. The ranger was wondering if Curt and young Gabe were concealed among the ruins, when suddenly an owl floated through the moonlight and disappeared. A moment later, it perched among the ruins of the building beyond the fire, and uttered its weird call.

As the echo of the night bird's cry died into silence, Curt and young Gabe rose from among the ruin. With drawn six-guns, they ran toward the outlaws, believing that the hoot of the owl had been the signal arranged in advance by Jim Hazel.

At the cry of the owl, the Thunder Bird had leaped to his feet, Scrambling out of the cellar, like a great ape, the red-bearded dwarf caught sight of Curt and Gabe. With a hoarse bellow, he drew his six-gun and fired two shots at the approaching mountaineer. To Jim Hazel's horror, Curt staggered and fell. Running toward his brother, young Gabe picked Curt up in his arms. Pursued by the Thunder Bird's bullets, he regained the shelter of the ruin.

Leaping to his feet, Jim Hazel fired at the Thunder Bird. But untouched by the ranger's bullet, the outlaw chief dropped back into the cellar and rejoined his men.

Scrambling up the sides of the cellar until they could see over the edge of the hole, the desperadoes sent a storm of lead hurtling toward Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor. But not a bullet touched either the ranger or the mountaineer, for they had dropped to their knees and taken shelter among the rocks.

Silence followed the outlaws' volley; then loud and clear Jim Hazel's voice rang out:

"Drop those guns and give yourselves up, or expect no mercy!"

A howl of astonishment from the outlaws was followed by a hoarse roar from the Thunder Bird:

"If yuh want us, come and get

us, ranger! Either you or us never shall leave the mountain alive!"

Another volley from the outlaws followed the Thunder Bird's defiance, and, glancing off a rock, a bullet cut a gash in Jim Hazel's cheek. To Bill Tigor's horror, Jim Hazel slumped backward to the ground. As the mountaineer stooped over the fallen ranger, Jim Hazel grinned.

"I'm not badly hurt, Bill," he said in a low tone, "but it might be a good idea to let the Thunder Bird believe he has killed us both. It is about the only way in which we'll lure the gang out of that hole."

"I get yuh, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor. "Now jest listen to me holler, as the feller said when the mule stepped on his toe."

Crouching beside the ranger, Bill Tigor began to howl and groan like a man in mortal agony.

"Yuh've killed Jimmy!" howled the mountaineer, "and I'm shot through the stummick! I'm dyin'! I'm——"

Bill Tigor's voice grew fainter and fainter and died into silence.

For a few moments, nothing happened; then several heads were raised above the edge of the cellar in which the desperadoes were cornered. Staring at the ruin where Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor lay waiting, the outlaws seemed to be trying to muster courage enough to see if the ranger and the mountaineer were really dead.

Taking advantage of the fact that the Thunder Bird and all his men were gazing toward the rocks among which they lay, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor crawled through the ruin, and came out on the opposite side of it. In a few minutes, they had gained a position behind the outlaws, and there they were joined by young Gabe Tigor.

"Curt is shot through the laig, Jimmy," said young Gabe.

Though young Gabe had pitched his voice low, it reached the keen ears of the Thunder Bird. Turning his head, the outlaw chief was so astonished that for a few seconds he could only stare at the leveled six-guns of Jim Hazel, Bill, and young Gabe Tigor.

"The game's up," said Jim Hazel sharply. "Drop your guns and raise your hands."

But faced with death by hanging if he surrendered, the Thunder Bird whipped up his six-gun. At the roar of the .45 a bullet cut through the collar of Jim Hazel's mackinaw and seared the skin of his neck.

Then the loud report of the ranger's weapon crashed against the silence. With his right arm grazed by Jim Hazel's bullet, the Thunder Bird rolled into the cellar, howling to his men to kill the forest ranger and the mountaineers.

Cornered, but game to the last, the outlaws poured a volley of hot lead toward Jim Hazel and his companions. But they were a second too late. The bullets passed above the bodies of Jim Hazel and the two Tigor boys as they dropped to their knees. Then three outlaws fell before the withering fire of the ranger and the mountaineers.

"Up with your hands!" yelled Jim Hazel. "Up, I tell you, or you are dead men!"

Dropping their weapons, the three surviving desperadoes raised their hands. Leaving them covered by the weapons of Bill and young Gabe Tigor, Jim Hazel leaped toward the Thunder Bird.

Down on one knee, the outlaw leveled his six-gun and met Jim Hazel with a bullet which drilled a hole through his right ear; then the weapon was struck from the Thun-

der Bird's hand, and he was hurled onto his face by the impact of the ranger's weight.

Instantly the outlaw rolled over and, the next moment, was squatting on his heels, like a great ape preparing to spring. With his savage heart unconquered, the powerful, red-bearded dwarf fixed blazing eyes on Jim Hazel.

"Shoot, dang yuh!" he roared. "If yuh was in my place, I wouldn't show yuh no mercy, and I don't look for none from yuh."

Jim Hazel holstered his smoking six-gun, drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and stepped toward the snarling desperado.

"Hold out your wrists," ordered the young ranger. "I arrest you in the name of the law!"

Glaring like a wild beast at bay, the Thunder Bird shifted his position until his weight rested on the balls of his feet. Then, like a suddenly released spring, he hurled himself through the air straight at Jim Hazel's throat!

Quick though the outlaw was, Jim Hazel was quicker. Stepping to one side, he avoided the desperado's charge and, swinging the handcuffs around his head, brought them down with a crash on the Thunder Bird's skull.

Then, as the outlaw stumbled and almost fell, Jim Hazel tossed the steel bracelets aside. Hurling himself forward, the ranger caught the Thunder Bird by the throat and bore him backward.

But the wiry two-hundred-pound dwarf threw Jim Hazel off as if he had been a child. Bouncing to his feet, the Thunder Bird stood waiting. With his huge hands outstretched and his teeth bared, he dared Jim Hazel to come within reach of his powerful arms.

For a few seconds, the two men circled each other like wrestlers seeking an opening; then suddenly the Thunder Bird lowered his head. With clutching hands, he dived toward Jim Hazel's ankles.

"I'll break every bone in your body, if once I get my hands on yuh!" howled the desperado. "I'll twist yore neck like I would a chick and——"

Biff! Smash! Crack! Dodging the outlaw's rush, Jim Hazel peppered his face with rights and lefts, and drove him backward.

Then, seeing an opening, the ranger drove his right fist to the outlaw's hairy chin with a force that rocked the Thunder Bird back on his heels.

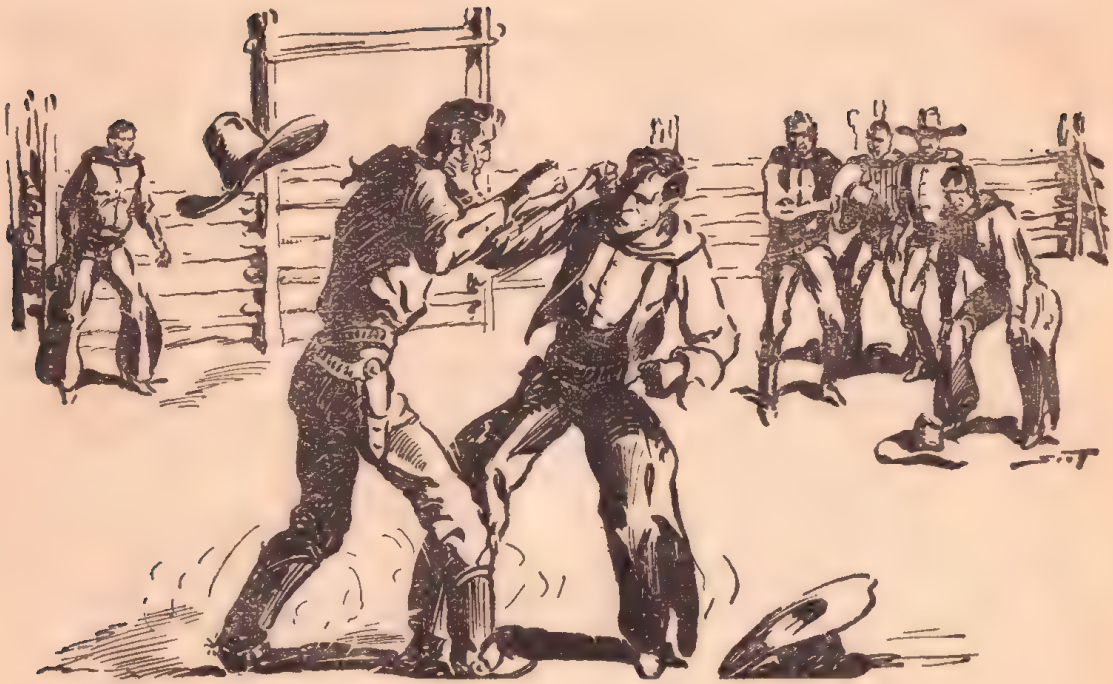
"You'd better give up," panted the young ranger, "or I'll have to knock you out.

But suddenly the Thunder Bird gave a hoarse shout as he saw the six-gun which had been knocked out of his hand. Stooping quickly, the outlaw snatched up the weapon.

And then Jim Hazel knew that it was no use to show any mercy toward the Thunder Bird, who meant either to kill or to be killed in his fight for life and freedom.

Before the Thunder Bird could level the six-gun, Jim Hazel's right fist landed on his jaw with a force that almost dislocated his neck. Knocked out by that terrific wallop, the most dreaded outlaw in the Thunder Bird Mountains toppled backward to the ground, with the huge fingers of his right hand still gripping the butt of his gun.

This time, the Thunder Bird ought ter be caught fer keeps. It shore looks like it, too. But he ain't been hanged yet, an' until he dances on air, Jim Hazel will be plenty wise ter sleep with one eye open. Thet dwarf is one snaky hombre. Watch fer the next Jim Hazel story in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



Two Fightin' Hoss Thieves

By William A. Todd

Author of "Six-guns In Blue Mist Basin," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE BUST-UP.

FATE couldn't have better matched two cowboys for a knock-down, drag-out feud than "Buff" Riley and Jake Kettle.

Each was just short of voting age, as carefree as a wild colt and as wise as an old steer. Their knuckles and gun butts were decorated with the winning scars of many a range tiff. Yet either was ready to write the other down as a know-nothin' greenhorn, a tinhorn four-flusher, and a loud-mouthed braggart.

When Buff and Jake accidentally met in front of the newly white-painted gate to the XYZ ranch yard, both were busted high, wide, and handsome. Hoping to land jobs, they each thought the other was already drawing wages and grub from the strange outfit. So trouble sat back on its haunches for a moment and waited for them to discover the error.

"Howdy, stranger!" said Buff Riley, quickly swinging down from his paint pony to open the creaking yard gate. "Yuh trot through. I'll close up."

Buff, who knew his range politics well, calculated on making a friend at XYZ, some one to put in a good word for him with the boss. He

had been battling blizzards and hiding from cold rains in sandy caves all the way from Idaho to Arizona.

Work had eluded him as successfully as gold eludes an old desert rat. His leathery cheeks were hollowing, his gray eyes growing a bit sad, and his curly brown hair needed cutting badly.

As for Jake Kettle, he had come from the Texas Panhandle country, spending his savings along the way with a reckless hand. His sorrel looked better fed than Buff's paint. And Jake himself showed that he had been eating in good hash houses and sleeping in comfortable hotels. His checkerboard shirt was clean, his woolly chaps free from burs and mud. Anxious to make a good impression at XYZ, Jake now hopped out of the saddle to show he was not lazy.

"If yuh open the gate," cried Jake Kettle, "I'll close it. That's the fair way."

"This politeness quite overcomes me." Buff Riley grinned, moving through the entrance to the ranch yard. "Thankee, cowboy."

"Think nothin' of it," chuckled the Texan, locking the gate behind him. "My name is Jake Kettle. I'm powerful glad to know an upstandin' gent like yoreself."

They pumped hands, each sizing the other up as a member of XYZ. Jake was a bit shorter in height, but he made up for this with wider shoulders. His nose was turned up, his eyes black and sharp, and a knife had left a purple scar on his pointed chin. But no rancher would have hesitated to give him a hard and important task to tackle.

And there was something honest and reliable looking about Buff Riley, whose features were more clean-cut.

"A money-makin' spread, this," Buff remarked, putting out a feeler for information as they trailed their mounts up the ranch yard. "The boss knows his stuff." He took in the layout with experienced gray eyes.

The barn was big, the bunk house boasted a stone fireplace, and the owner's home had a shingled roof. Chickens squawked in the distance, and pigs squealed. From a near-by corral came the scream of a cayuse, and the wind brought the smell of a branded flank.

"Yes, this outfit also looks good to me," Jake Kettle replied, glancing at three figures coming through the bars of the horse pen. "Which one of those fine-lookin' fellers is the owner hyar?"

At that, Buff Riley came to a dead halt, a cold chill shooting down his spine and his mouth falling open.

"Yuh mean yuh don't work hyar?"

"Don't yuh?" exclaimed Jake, black eyes staring.

Buff made no answer. In cases of emergency, he could think and act quickly, which he did now by jumping back as if ducking a blow. Suddenly he was racing toward the three men at the horse pen, his batwing chaps and high-heeled boots almost tripping him. But he was four jumps ahead of Jake Kettle.

"I got hyar first!" Buff yelled. "The job is mine. Don't pay no attention to the other jasper."

"I'm the cowboy yuh want!" shouted Jake, trying to overtake the taller waddy. "Riley is a four-flusher. I shut the gate what he was going to leave open."

"Strike" Benson, owner of the XYZ, stepped out from the corral rails to meet them, his hands dropping to two high-holstered gun butts in a gesture of self-protection. Strike's bearing spoke of authority

—brutal authority; the kind that might have built up a prosperous outfit in a short time. He was heavy, with sloping, powerful shoulders, a thick bull neck, and a flat evil-looking face.

"Stand back, both o' yuh!" he roared, angered by the surprise the two punchers had thrown into him. "What do yuh mean, sneakin' up on me? Do yuh both want a dose o' lead?"

Buff Riley came to a sliding halt as he saw the XYZ owner's two companions wriggle through the bars of the horse pen and draw guns. It looked like a warm reception, so Buff snapped his mouth shut.

But Jake Kettle was not put out. "Plug this tramp!" he exclaimed, pointing at the Idaho waddy. "I'm plumb shore the law is chasin' him. An' yuh need me to rod yore spread."

At that, Buff Riley boiled up, turning savagely upon the last speaker.

"Yuh runt!" he snapped. "Don't go accusin' me o' wrongdoin'. I'll bulldog the first steer handy an' hang the critter all over your ugly face."

"Don't fool yoreself," retorted Jake Kettle, hunching over fighting fashion. "Yuh couldn't even rope a fence post. Look at that fancy dude quirt hangin' from yore wrist. I'm the champeen bronc buster o' the Panhandle. An' I'll ride yuh off this range, wind-broke, spavined, an' knock-kneed."

"Stop it!" ordered Strike Benson, throwing out his big arms to separate the pair. "I'll take charge o' this situation. No! Keep quiet both o' yuh. Yes, I know yuh both want jobs."

And the XYZ owner pushed them apart and glared at one first and then the other. Strike seemed to have a suspicion in his mind about them, but soon he satisfied himself. The pair were surely not acting planned parts.

"Where do yuh come from?" Strike asked, grinning.

"Idaho," snapped Buff Riley. "I'll work fer most anythin', an' I'll even peel potatoes."

"Texas Panhandle!" ejaculated Jake Kettle at the same time. "I'm the huckleberry for this fine-lookin' outfit. Yuh ought to see me stop a stampede, put out a prairie fire, or catch a coyote with my bare hands."

"Yuh don't say!" exclaimed Strike Benson, startled by such feats for a short moment, and then doubting Jake's boasting.

"He's a faker," snapped Buff Riley. "He'd jaw yuh ter death in one day. I keeps silent and lets my work tell the tale."

"Pipe down, both o' yuh," ordered Strike Benson, stepping away from them, an evil glint in his pink-rimmed eyes. "I git the drift o' things now. Both o' yuh think yo're pretty good. Yuh would do anythin' ter work fer me. Waal"—he rubbed his unshaven chin with thick fingers—"I might have jest one job. Couldn't yuh two settle it yoreselves?"

Buff Riley stiffened. Strike Benson could only mean one thing by that remark, and it struck the Idaho waddy that perhaps the XYZ owner merely wanted to see a fight. In that case, Strike wouldn't be a pleasant boss.

But Buff needed food, and his paint needed oats and a rest. He was positive that he could lick Jake Kettle.

And Jake Kettle was just as positive that he could whip Buff.

"Yuh mean fer us ter fight it out?" asked the Texan.

"Suit yoreselves," chuckled Strike Benson. "Are yuh afraid?"

"Afraid!" snapped Buff Riley, stung by the remark. "I ain't afraid, but I shore don't see no sense——"

"If yuh think I'm yaller," interrupted Jake Kettle, hands ripping his gun belt from his midriff, "jest turn yore instrument over ter the band an' go home."

Nothing could have stopped the fight now. As the Texan climbed out of his woolly chaps, Buff Riley threw his fancy riding quirt onto the ground and unbuckled his bullet harness. Something inside of him said to be careful, for hunger and days of riding had weakened his strength.

But now his anger at Strike Benson and Jake Kettle's wisecracks fired his fighting spirit. He was ready to lick the entire ranch yard.

"Everythin' goes!" howled Strike Benson. "The hombre what wins gets a fine job. Don't kill each other too soon. We want ter see some fun."

Out of the horse pen came four XYZ hands on the run. Their shouts were unheard by Buff and Jake, who were squaring off from each other. Bets were being made. But it was hard for any one to pick the winner.

Like two wolves, the Idaho waddy and the Texan circled each other, watching for an opening. And suddenly the scrap was on.

Fate had planned the beginning of the feud just that way.

CHAPTER II.

GUN-SLINGERS.

IT was Jake Kettle, with the quicker temper, who rushed. His head was down, his arms whirling. He planned to fight rough-and-tumble style. A dozen wrestling holds were stored back in his head, and a slimmer man seemed like easy meat.

But Buff Riley, cool-headed, knew he must not lock with the Texan. Too much energy would be wasted in rolling about on the ground. So Buff stood off, driving straight fists at his foe, and backing around the ranch yard. Soon Jake might give him an opening for a sledge-hammer knock-out blow.

Yelling excitedly, cheering and mocking, the XYZ hands followed the battlers. Two hounds raced up and stood barking. Strike Benson howled advice and offered to lick both of them unless they mixed up. Horses back in the corral milled in fright. But the two battlers heard nothing as they traded blows, with Jake trying desperately to close in and drag the Idaho waddy down to earth.

Suddenly Buff backed into a pump, its iron handle stabbing him in the spine. He knew instantly that he was caught, and lashed out with both arms. But his foe took the blows in the face and leaped in at him with a snarl. Time and again, Buff tried to hold off the Texan with short body jabs that brought only grunts from Jake.

They fell in a whirl of legs and arms, grappled and rolled over and over in a swirl of dust. Now Jake was all over Buff, whose head began to spin. He squirmed around like a tortured bobcat, trying desperately to get away.

"I'll give yuh the works!" Jake cried out. "Yuh'll get a lesson in Texas shearing."

And Buff, still trying to punch, felt his ears twisted, then knees jabbing him in the ribs, and finally the Texan was rubbing dirt into his eyes. Then Jake's strong legs were

wrapped around him in a deadly scissors hold, while his fists punched Buff in the face.

"Yuh skunk!" roared Buff Riley. "We don't fight like that in Idaho. I'll tear yuh ter-pieces!"

Buff unwound like a broncho. But his arms were like lead, and he felt as if he was going to be ill. Every way he turned, Jake still had him in the scissors, until Buff, with a great heave, staggered to his feet with his foe still wrapped to him.

The XYZ hands were dancing around the pair like lunatics, and dogs nipped at Buff's feet. With a burst of anger, he threw himself flat to the ground, carrying his foe with him. And as they landed, the shock broke Jake's leg grip.

Then, as quick as flash, Buff Riley dodged away and grabbed the Texan by the scruff of the neck. Jerking him past the pump as he would a sheep, Buff hurled Jake into the watering trough. Only the Idaho waddy fell in after him.

They almost drowned there together, hanging to each other like bulldogs. But the trough burst its sides, and they rolled out. Now Buff could not see, and his head was splitting. He felt Jake lift him clean off the ground, carry him a distance, and then hurl him over the horse pen.

Buff came down in a puddle of mud, wiped his eyes, and staggered up to meet the Texan coming through the corral rails. Three times, Buff smashed his foe in the face, and then Jake closed again. A blow struck Buff's empty stomach, and the world went black before his eyes.

He knew he was done for, that he could fight no more. But he fired one last uppercut that landed on Jake's cheek.

Both cowboys fell together, unable to hold each other. Buff was on his knees swaying from side to side, a battered wreck, unable to think. But he could see that Jake was squirming about on the ground, trying to shake something loose from inside his head. Either might have nailed the other, but neither had the strength.

And as the XYZ outfit came shouting around them, Buff and Jake were lifted to their feet. Cold reason was returning to their brains. They heard Strike Benson shouting for them to mix again. And soon the XYZ hands let them stand swaying. They glowered at each other, but each knew that the other was ready to collapse.

"Have yuh had enough?" growled Buff Riley.

"Have yuh?" snapped Jake.

"Go to it!" cried Strike Benson. "Nobody has won yet. The job ain't decided."

Buff Riley, wiping the grime from his face, turned savagely upon the XYZ owner.

"The job ain't worth it," he said, and slipped through the corral rails.

"He's quittin'!" sneered Strike Benson.

"So am I," said Jake Kettle, climbing over the top of the horse pen.

As the two punchers donned their chaps and gun belts, Strike Benson confronted them. He was crimson with anger that they had laid down. All the bully that was in him came to the fore at that moment.

"Yo're both yaller!" he taunted them. "I wouldn't hire any one o' yuh. Show yore courage. Shoot out the feud at ten paces."

Buff Riley, gun strapped down, turned upon the XYZ owner with blazing eyes.

"Yuh low-down son of a side-

windin' polecat," the Idaho waddy flamed, "I'm the best draw in my State! If yuh want a sample o' my lead, drag yore own iron pronto. I'll work free fer yuh—but it will be diggin' yore grave."

Strike Benson stepped back, eyes popping, as if he hadn't expected that much spunk was left in Buff Riley. And at that moment, there came a snarl from Jake Kettle, who stood off to the side.

"Let the hull herd draw guns!" he cried. "I'm champeen bullet-tosser o' the Panhandle. I'll throw their bodies ter the pigs, includin' Buff Riley's!"

Strike Benson swallowed hard. "Don't take things too hard, boys," he protested, now white with fear. "This ain't my quarrel. It's yores. If yuh want grub, I'll be glad ter help yuh out. But I really ain't got a job fer yuh both."

"Let the Texan eat yore slops," jeered Buff Riley, picking up his hat and walking to his horse. "I got some respect for my innards."

As the Idaho waddy forked the bronc and turned it down the yard, he saw Jake Kettle mount.

"Don't any hombre in this yard ever cross my trail again," Jake threatened. "I never run inter such a bunch o' mangy scum in my hull life, an' that includes the Idaho skunk."

With that, Jake spurred his mount past Buff Riley, who watched him head for a wire fence. The Texan's sorrel went over with a long jump and sped to the prairie.

Buff Riley let himself out of the yard by the newly painted gate, which he left wide open in revenge.

"I've got a feelin'," he muttered, "that I'm goin' ter meet the hull gang ag'in. An' when I do—when I do——"

His skinned knuckles bunched.

CHAPTER III.

THREATS.

THAT same evening the exhausted Idaho waddy led his hoof-sore mount into the three-sided town of Big Pine. A look at the ramshackle cabins and stores told him its inhabitants were as poverty-stricken as himself, so he wound his way toward the local livery stable.

Confronting the stable owner with a bruised face and torn clothing, Buff didn't have a hard time convincing the fellow that free oats and lodging for his horse were needed, as well as a flop for himself in the hayloft. For such courtesy, the Idaho waddy offered to clean the stalls in the morning and tote water.

"That suits me," said the liveryman, scared of what might happen if he refused.

That settled, Buff trailed his spurs up the rickety plank sidewalk, feeling somewhat better. But there was still a sinking sensation behind his gun belt. Never having bummed a cent in his life, his honor refused to allow him to do so now.

A search of his pockets revealed a dollar watch and a clasp hunting knife, neither of which would make a good trade for a meal. Suddenly he thought of the fancy riding quirt that had dangled from his wrist all the way from Idaho. Had he left it at XYZ headquarters?

"I'll bet that Texan swiped it," Buff growled, hand falling to a gun butt. "By golly! I think I saw him pick it up."

At that moment, as Buff's face flamed, a large figure in a black coat stepped directly in front of him. There was the flash of a silver star.

"What brings yuh ter town, cowboy?" asked the sheriff of Big Pine suspiciously. "Were yuh drug hyar by a rope behind a wild hoss?"

No hombre is so terrified by the law as one without a cent of money, for often strangers are thrown into cow-town calabooses for several days unless they can reveal five dollars or more. Buff, imagining that the worst had happened, forced a bold front and tried to smile through cracked lips. But it was a feeble attempt.

"I'd shore like ter git a job usin' a rope, John Law," the Idaho waddy replied. "How would yuh like an honest, hard-workin' deputy?"

The sheriff's blue eyes narrowed, as if he were searching deeply into Buff's soul. What he found didn't appear to please him.

"Busted?" he asked.

"I got a place ter sleep ter-night," replied Buff uneasily.

"Unbuckle yore gun," ordered the sheriff, stepping close to grab him if he tried any monkeyshines. "I'll give it back in the mornin', when yuh'll be leavin' town."

With a shrug of his shoulders, the Idaho waddy obeyed.

"It's a tough life," he muttered sorrowfully. "If I'm headed for the lock-up, I hope yuh'll not forget some supper."

Taking the weapon, the sheriff stepped back and scratched his head. The marks of an old coyboy stood out on the law man as plainly as they did on Buff Riley now.

"Yuh sound a heap more peaceful than yuh look," muttered the sheriff, feeling in his pocket. "I was young once myself." He extended a silver dollar. "Use some beefsteak on yore face to take down the swellin' before yuh cook it," he chuckled. "Adios!"

"Gosh!" gasped Buff Riley, slightly dazed. "Thankee, sheriff, a million times."

After a load of beans and ham and eggs and corn bread and four cups of coffee, the Idaho waddy retired to the hayloft of the livery stable, where he lay looking up at a black ceiling.

"Luck is turnin'," he sighed happily. "Mebbe that run-in with Jake Kettle was not the worst that could happen. Whoever would think a sheriff could be so all-fired noble?"

The next morning, after cleaning up the livery stable so that it shone like a race-horse stable, Buff Riley shaved and mended the rips in his shirt with a leather-mending needle. He scrubbed down his paint pony from ear tips to fetlocks and led it toward the hoosegow, where the sheriff sat on the plank sidewalk in a tilted chair.

"Yuh two sky-hooters don't look so awful bad ter-day," the law man greeted the Idaho waddy and the horse. "I hear Dan Barr is lookin' fer trail drovers."

Buff halted short. "Yuh don't say! Whar does he live?"

"Twenty mile southwest by road. He told me ter send boys down."

Hope leaped within the Idaho waddy's swelling chest. "Sheriff, yo're my pal for life," he said. "I'll pay yuh back that dollar with interest. I kin hardly wait ter get to Dan Barr."

The sheriff tossed him a gun belt. "Good luck ter yuh."

"Thankee, sheriff." The Idaho waddy mounted quickly, hesitated, and turned in the saddle. "Listen," he sang out. "If yuh see a tough nut around hyar, don't send him ter Dan Barr. The coyote is called Jake Kettle, an' I'm plumb shore he's a murderer."

"What's he look like?" inquired the sheriff quickly.

Buff described his enemy. "I'll come ter town an' identify him with great pleasure."

Dan Barr's rancho claimed a

green-grassed valley lying between red hills and high mountains which were snow-capped in the winter. The owner specialized in whitefaces, and ran some fine blooded horses on the side.

His ranch house was adobe, patterned after a Spanish home, and it looked like a million dollars from the distance. The barn, sheds, bunk house, and fowl coops rather helped appearances than detracted from them.

As Buff Riley came down the road at a lope, his face lighted up in a big grin. And he put the paint pony over a whitewashed rail fence to get into the yard. Such a trick, which he hadn't been able to do at Strike Benson's, gave him a certain satisfaction. And as the paint landed, a silvery-haired hombre stood watching from the open door of a log smithy.

Dan Barr smiled with approval upon horse and rider. The DB owner was medium-sized, with a handsome pink face and clear blue eyes. He wore a buckskin vest, no hat, and corduroy trousers tucked into high laced boots. No gun belt rested about his waist, and Buff sized him up as a friendly hombre.

"Good mawnin', mister," sang out the Idaho waddy, riding his mount up to the smithy. "I was sent hyar by the sheriff o' Big Pine. He's a fine friend o' mine."

"Well, well," replied Dan Barr, watching the Idaho waddy swing down from the saddle. "You must mean Jack Caffrey."

"No less a person than that," chuckled Buff Riley, taking a long shot that such a man and the sheriff were one. "He said as how yuh needed a red-hot cowboy. So right away he recommended me."

Dan Barr's blue eyes narrowed, as if he had not expected this. He thought a moment, regarding the war scratches adorning Buff. Then he asked:

"Did you fall off your horse in getting here?"

The Idaho waddy swallowed hard, rubbed his face and became serious. "I never fell off a cayuse in my life. But yesterday I tried to brand a wild un. Dirt got in my eyes, an' before I knew it, my looks were spoiled." He paused, hoping the DB owner wouldn't think he was talking about an hombre instead of a steer. "Mr. Barr, yuh couldn't want a harder worker than myself, Buff Riley."

"Huh!" grunted the cattleman, brows knitting. "Well, if Jack Caffrey recommended you, I guess it's O. K. For a second, I thought you had been in a fight. Nothing of that kind goes around here."

"Shucks!" ejaculated the Idaho waddy, hanging his head. "I'm real peaceable. Yuh'll never catch me out of tune."

Dan Barr offered his hand. "Put your paint in the pasture north of the ranch house. Then come here to shoe some Morgans. The foreman is down at my round-up camp. We'll join him later."

Leading his paint pony by the ring of the bit, Buff Riley went up the yard past the ranch house. His step was light. He was enjoying that comfortable feeling of security, and emotion gushed from him.

"Hoss," he talked to his mount, "we've come to the end of a long trail. Ain't Dan Barr an upstandin' gent? Look at this layout. Jest look, yuh ornery fool! Don't yuh savvy what's happened ter us?" He halted, shifting the cayuse's head toward the door of the ranch house. "Did yuh ever see a swell place like——"

Buff cut his words short as the

door opened, and out stepped a girl, the like of whom the Idaho waddy had never seen. She was attired in light-tan breeches and shiny riding boots. Her waist was robin's-egg blue, and she wore a red neckerchief over golden-blond hair. Her skin was too creamy to have ever been touched by wind or sun.

No Westerner, that girl, but a vision from the East. And Buff Riley stared, an unbelieving greenhorn.

The young lady came toward him, as if she were used to being stared at, and liked it.

"Hello, cowboy!" she said cheerfully. "I thought Uncle Dan said to bring two horses. Aren't you riding to the round-up camp with me to see that the bad men don't steal his tenderfoot?"

Buff gulped. "Me!" he exclaimed. "Excuse me, miss. Do yuh mean that yore uncle said fer me——"

The thud of moving horses' hoofs caught the girl's attention, and she turned with wide eyes to see a mounted puncher leading another saddled animal toward her. Buff Riley, catching his senses, noted the approaching rider's black coned hat, woolly chaps, and checkerboard shirt. The fellow's features were a bit bruised, his eyes black and sharp, and a purple scar decorated his chin.

"Jake Kettle!" gasped Buff Riley, stepping back in alarm.

"The Idaho skunk!" cried the Texan, leaping from the saddle with the quickness of a man who had felt a cactus thorn.

For a brief moment, Buff Riley and Jake Kettle paused, shocked to a standstill at the suddenness of the meeting. Enmity was in their hearts. A false move, and they would have flashed their weapons. They had forgotten where they were, and remembered only that fight in the XYZ ranch yard, when each did the other out of a job.

"Don't you two men know each other?" the young lady's voice brought them to their senses. "What on earth is the matter?"

Buff's mouth opened to say something, then it snapped shut, and he made a queer gurgling sound, as if he had swallowed a stale fish. Only a moment ago, the Idaho waddy had promised Dan Barr to keep the peace. He realized that Jake was employed at this ranch, had most likely got the job the night before.

"Nothin' is wrong, miss," said Jack Kettle, flushing with angry embarrassment. "I'm jest bringin' up yore hoss." And he glowered at Buff Riley, who moved away to allow the girl to mount.

Suddenly Buff leaped forward. "Let me help yuh, miss."

"No, let me!" exclaimed Jake, stooping to give her a foothold in his cupped hands.

"My!" ejaculated the girl. "How gallant you both are! But I think I can get up alone." And she swung aboard the horse.

As Buff and Jake snarled at each other, Dan Barr's niece spurred her horse down the ranch yard.

"Listen!" snapped the Texan.

"Yuh listen ter me!" cried the Idaho waddy. "This ranch ain't big enough ter hold us both."

"Yo're leavin' pronto," jeered Jake Kettle. "I'll run yuh off hyar ragged. If it wasn't fer that gal, I'd blow yuh ter smithereens!"

"If I didn't promise Dan Barr somethin'," replied Buff savagely, "I'd throw yuh from hyar ter the mangy State o' Texas!"

Jake Kettle laughed harshly. "So yuh got a job, have yuh?" he taunted. "Waal, yuh won't keep it long. I'll pull every mean an' low-down trick I know. I won't stop at

nothin'. This is a warnin'. I'll brand yuh as a crook."

Buff Riley mocked him with a laugh. "I've already told the sheriff in Big Pine that yuh were a murderer. He'll be comin' soon with a danglin' noose."

"Watch out for me!" cried the Texan heatedly. "If yo're still hyar when I come back, it's goin' ter be awful tough."

"I'll be waitin' with fists an' guns."

Buff's words were the last, for Jake had to leap aboard his bronc to take after Dan Barr's niece, who was riding out of the ranch yard. But Buff felt a little satisfaction after the final retort.

Jealousy made him grind his teeth. It was just his luck for Jake Kettle to ride off with the prettiest girl Buff had even seen in cow country.

CHAPTER IV.

THEFT.

TROTTING over the sage-scented prairie with Dan Barr's niece, Jake Kettle started the first act in the program of vengeance he had decided upon.

It was not that the Texan was born with a hatred for Buff Riley, any more than the latter despised him. If they had not fought in the XYZ ranch yard and done each other out of a job, they might have been good friends.

Now neither was willing to admit defeat. Since fists had settled nothing, Jake resolved to show superior wits in bringing about his enemy's downfall.

"What was wrong with you two boys in front of the ranch house?" asked Nancy Barr, as the mounts slowed to a walk to catch their wind.

The Texan, who had been hoping for such a question, shook his head solemnly.

"Yore uncle just employed that hombre," he replied. "I'd hate to tell yuh my suspicions about him. He was in plenty bad company when I last saw him."

Nothing could have made the girl more curious, and she flashed a pretty smile upon Jake Kettle. "I thought he looked rather nice. Is he really bad?"

"Would yuh call stealin' hosses bad?" asked the Texan angrily, his eyes blazing at the compliment she had paid his foe.

"Do you mean he is a horse thief?"

"There's a heap of hombres what would like to swipe those fine Morgans penned in the north pasture," growled Jake. "Yore uncle ought to be warned."

Nancy Barr laughed. "You Westerners suspect everybody," she said. "Uncle Dan keeps warning me to be careful. If all bad men look like that cowboy in the ranch yard, I shouldn't be a bit afraid to meet them anywhere."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Jake Kettle, and he fell silent.

In the past, the Texan had proved himself a ladies' man. It hurt him that Nancy Barr didn't recognize his dash and accomplishments. She made no comment about the way he rode his cayuse. Nor did she ask how the notches had come to his gun butt. Jake gladly would have made up wild tales to satisfy her.

During their ride over the rolling prairie, he twice told of thrilling adventures, in which he was the hero. But she did not appear interested. Was she thinking of Buff Riley? Or was she merely putting Jake in his place as a hired hand? Jake's heart grew heavy. Soon he became as speechless as Buff Riley had been at

the meeting at the ranch-house door.

On a hilltop, they spied the white canvas top of the round-up camp's chuck wagon, and the girl spurred her horse ahead eagerly. To the left of the hill, a thousand head of cattle tossed their horns. Cowboys, with "yip-yees" echoing from their threats, were dashing among the critters to find fat steers for market. The confusion made Nancy Barr forget about Jake, and he allowed her to cut off to meet the XYZ foreman, who was riding from the herd.

The Texan's work that day was branding calves, which two punchers brought him from the valley. He hadn't time to speak to Nancy Barr again, but now and then he caught sight of her red headpiece and blue waist in the distance. After lunch, he saw Dan Barr come across the plains, with Buff Riley beside him.

"The skunk!" growled the Texan. "He's tryin' ter git in good with the Old Man. I wonder what he said about me."

Then Jake saw the Idaho waddy put to cutting work in the big herd, which arrangement postponed their meeting. Dan Barr rode off home with his niece, clearing the field for action. When the cook sounded supper call, Jake made a bee line for camp, and stood first in line at the washbasins behind the big chuck wagon.

As Steve Hammond, the XYZ foreman, rode up, the Texan was drying behind his ears.

"How's things goin', Kettle?" asked the foreman, who was a lanky hombre with a hatchet face.

"Couldn't be better, boss," replied the Texan. "I like this outfit fine. An' unless somebody starts monkeyshines, yuh'll find me a real hard worker an' danged peaceable."

Steve Hammond grinned and took off his silver rowels and chaps and unfastened the wide belt which supported a bone-handled six-gun.

"Dan Barr hired yuh an' that Riley hombre to go up the trail with the market stock," he said, stowing the weapon and spurs in the back of the chuck wagon. "Yuh both better stay down hyar ter-night to make friends with the critters."

Jake blinked, and the foreman walked off. A shaky feeling took hold of the Texan, who realized that he would never be able to ride circle with Buff Riley without a fight. Something had to be done quickly to prevent their getting fired.

Jake's eyes fastened on the foreman's gun belt in the back of the chuck wagon. Behind him, the hands had not yet come from the stock. Nobody was watching.

Quickly stepping to the wagon, Jake grabbed the bone-handled weapon and spurs, then hiked off to where the punchers had piled their slickers and blanket rolls.

"I told the skunk I'd frame him," growled the Texan, searching for a poncho bearing the initials of his foe.

After stowing the stolen articles in Buff Riley's blankets, Jake wandered back to camp, with a sheepish grin on his face. He was just in time to meet the riders from the herd. And Buff Riley was with them, sitting stiffly in the saddle, with smoldering eyes. As he swung down from the horse, Jake stood off, watching. They faced each other.

"Howdy, pard!" said Jake Kettle with false cheerfulness. "We're goin' ter have a little music after supper ter-night. Do yuh play a mouth organ?"

Buff Riley's mouth dropped open, and he stared at the Texan. Then he seemed to grasp a point.

"If yuh mean that I've been tellin' Dan Barr about yuh, that's

correct," snapped Buff. "I said as how I once seen a cattle rustler that looked like yuh. That's why he took his niece home before supper."

"Shucks!" exclaimed Jake Kettle, shrugging his shoulders. "The gal has already fallen daid in love with me."

And he turned and walked away, as if the possession of a lady's heart had put out all the feudal fires within him. He left Buff Riley staring at him suspiciously.

With tin plates in their hands, coffee mugs beside them, Jake and Buff sat far apart during the meal. There was not much conversation in camp, for cowboys believe in eating first and talking afterward. They arranged themselves on the tongue of the chuck wagon, and sprawled against the big wheels. As twilight fell, the light of a camp fire flickered in their faces.

"We'll be ready to drive on the day after to-morrow," the foreman spoke up, lowering his plate. "I'm leavin' six hands to watch the stock. If it rains, I'll come back from headquarters with the other boys." He rose and named off four men to do the night trick with Buff and Jake. "Be shore yuh don't let any critters get away."

And he hiked over to the rear of the chuck wagon to find his equipment.

As the other punchers stretched, Jake waited eagerly for what was going to happen. He could hardly keep his eyes off Buff Riley, who was studying the camp fire solemnly.

"Who moved my stuff!" came the foreman's husky voice. "It ain't where I put it."

Jake glanced at Buff Riley, who looked up quickly. Their eyes clashed, and Jake grinned.

"What's wrong, Steve?" called a cowhand, heading over to the foreman, and several others punchers followed.

Jake Kettle found himself standing near Buff, as the foreman pointed into the rear of the chuck wagon.

"I left some spurs, chaps, an' a bone-handled gun right there," Steve Hammond snapped. "Who moved them?" He turned to eye the cowboys.

"Mebbe somebody swiped 'em," suggested Jake Kettle. "Yuh kin search me. My blankets are over yonder in the pile."

"Nobody would be danged fool enough ter do that," snapped the XYZ foreman. "Yuh boys get inter the chuck wagon an' take a look. Hey! Bring a lantern."

Jake was first under the canvas top. The cook brought up a lantern, and the search began, with the Texan constantly calling out that the missing articles were nowhere to be found. Soon the foreman was inside the wagon, growling savagely. Punchers crowded at the rear, all offering suggestions.

Suddenly Jake Kettle noticed that Buff Riley was not among them, and he hurried to get outside. Just as he swung over the rear, his Idaho enemy appeared from beneath the wheels.

"Here they are!" Buff Riley called out, holding a gun belt, rowels, and chaps to view. He grinned at Jake Kettle, who realized that the Idaho waddy had visited the blanket pile without being seen.

"How did yuh know they were under there?" asked Jake Kettle angrily, and the foreman overheard.

"Yuh must have given me the hunch," chuckled Buff, handing the equipment over to the foreman. "Under the wagon would be the last place that any one would think of

lookin'. So I figured a crook would hide them there."

Jack Kettle turned fiery red in the face. "Do yuh mean that I——"

"Shore I mean it!" exclaimed Buff Riley, eyes flashing.

"What in tarnation is wrong with yuh two hombres?" demanded the lanky foreman, stepping between them. "Don't get so excited over my stuff. Mebbe I stowed it under the wagon myself an' plumb forgot about it. We don't go in for scrappin' on this range. If yuh two boys don't cotton to each other, Dan Barr would like to know about it."

The words were hardly past the foreman's lips when the gallop of hoofs caught the attention of the cowboys. A rider pierced the light from the camp fire, came to a halt, and jumped down from the saddle. It was Dan Barr himself, highly excited about something.

"Steve Hammond!" called the XYZ owner.

"What's wrong?" barked the foreman.

Dan Barr came toward the chuck wagon, eyes flashing, fists doubled.

"Did you tell anybody to move those Morgans from my north pasture?" he asked.

"No," replied the foreman, stepping away from Jake and Buff.

"Then the Morgans were stolen this afternoon!" exclaimed Dan Barr angrily. "The fence was cut on the west near the arroyo. They went down the ditch."

A murmur ran over the punchers, who all knew how Dan Barr loved his prize horses. And Jake Kettle and Buff Riley looked at each other suspiciously, as if each wondered whether this was a new trick to make the other out a horse thief.

"It must have happened this afternoon," Dan Barr continued speaking. "There was nobody at headquarters. This Buff Riley and myself shoed the last horse this morning before leaving. I want the hull outfit to hit the trail, dark or no dark!"

CHAPTER V.

CLEWS.

IN the general excitement, Buff Riley and Jake Kettle were forgotten, and they followed the other hands toward the picket line to slap saddles on fast cayuses.

Except for three men picked to guard the herd, the entire camp rode northward at a hard gallop, Dan Barr and Steve Hammond leading. Rifles had been jammed into scabbards.

Buff noted the grim set to the punchers' lips, and he realized that they meant business. Horse-stealing is no joke. And the Idaho waddy figured that Jake Kettle, if he had made off with the mounts through some outside friends, had bitten off more than he could chew.

In the darkness ahead, lights revealed the ranch house, but the cowboys did not slow down. Thundering through the yard, they swung into the north pasture where Buff Riley had seen the beautiful Morgans the morning before, and the first halt was at the cut fence.

Several lanterns were lighted, and by their glow, the damage was inspected. Buff watched Foreman Steve Hammond follow tracks to a deep arroyo, down which he pointed.

"The coyotes headed north through the ditch!" called the foreman. "Ride up to the far end an' see if yuh kin pick up more track."

Buff was off like a shot, his mount galloping along the bank of the arroyo, and soon he outdistanced the following riders. Jake Kettle would

be among them. Buff hardly knew what to expect from the Texan. After a mile of heavy going in the darkness, the Idaho waddy's paint pony slid down the sandy side of a big sink hole, where the arroyo had its beginning.

Buff was out of the saddle quickly, and he ran in his batwing chaps and high heels to the ditch. A match flared in his hand as he examined the ground. There were hoofprints there, telling that the Morgans had come into the sink hole. The tracks turned northwest.

"By golly!" exclaimed Buff, lighting a second match from the first one. "I half thought that Texan would have left the cayuses hyar with my name painted on their hides. But this looks like real rustlin' ter me. Those Morgans were herded along fast. I wonder if Jake Kettle really did have a hand in this deal."

At that moment, three horsemen came down the bank of the sink hole and shouted at the Idaho waddy. As the punchers arrived, he told them the story of the tracks, which pointed northwest. A lantern was flashed over the ground, and Buff saw Jake Kettle riding off to the outer darkness, where the Texan suddenly halted and jumped down.

Buff saw Jake stoop, pick something up, and strike a match.

"Look!" called the Texan. "Here's a quirt! It's got somebody's brand on the handle."

Buff Riley went cold from head to toe. Even at the distance, he recognized the quirt as the one which Jake Kettle had made fun of in the XYZ ranch yard. He had suspected that the Texan stole it. Now Buff was positive that his enemy was using it to frame him as a horse thief.

Before Dan Barr and the XYZ foreman got over to the Texan, Buff Riley let out a cry.

"That's my quirt!" he called, and he strode up to the group looking the lash over. "I must have dropped it an' forgotten to pick it up."

Jake Kettle's burning eyes met Buff's. There was a deadly pause.

"I don't recall seein' yuh use this quirt on the ride up," sneered the Texan. "Why was yuh so all-fired anxious to reach this sink hole before anybody else?"

Buff Riley's square jaw hardened, and his fists doubled. "Yo're goin' too far, Kettle," he rasped. "I've stood jest about enough of yore crooked work. Yuh can't frame me as a hoss thief an' get away with it."

Suddenly the Idaho waddy hunched over.

"Draw!" he shouted. "I'll give yuh first break fer yore smoke pole."

At that moment, Dan Barr flung himself upon Buff Riley, and the XYZ foreman caught Jake Kettle from dragging iron. The other XYZ men dived right and left to get out of the way of flying lead, which didn't come. Both enemies howled with rage at each other, but Dan Barr and Steve Hammond kept them apart. And finally other cowboys came to their aid and disarmed the Texas and Idaho waddies.

"This job kin go hang!" yelled Jake Kettle at the XYZ foreman. "It was Riley who stole them Morgans. He dropped his quirt in the sink hole while he was doin' it. He had time ter help his friends cut the fence an' bring the hosses up hyar while Dan Barr was shoein' other critters in the smithy this mawnin'."

"Yo're loco!" retorted Buff Riley. "I did all the shoein' in the smithy this mornin' while Dan Barr brung the Morgans from an' back to the pasture. Yuh crook, yuh knowed nobody would be at XYZ this after-

noon, so yore friends stole them hosses!"

"Shut up, both o' yuh!" roared Steve Hammond, pushing the pair apart. "This is the second time ternight that yuh two started trouble, once with fists, now with guns. Yo're both fired!"

"Wait a minute!" barked Dan Barr. "How about my Morgans? There may be something in the accusations these two men are making. Riley let fall a hint to me this afternoon that Jake Kettle was a rustler. An' my niece told me that Kettle did the same thing about Buff Riley. As soon as I told her the Morgans had been stolen, she said that Jake Kettle had told her the horses might be rustled any moment."

Buff Riley stepped back, flaming with anger. "There yuh are!" the Idaho waddy exclaimed. "Kettle knew all along that his friends were comin' fer the cayuses. He couldn't stop his boastin'. He fixed to plant my quirt on the trail. He's the hoss thief."

"Is that so?" retorted the Texan, as the punchers turned to glare at him. "I never saw so many fools in my life before, an' Riley is the worst o' the lot. Waal, I know where those hosses are. An' I'm goin' ter get them!"

"Stop him!" exclaimed Riley.

But Jake Kettle was too quick. Grabbing the XYZ foreman, the Texan spun him around as he jerked the man's gun away. Using the weapon to cover the Idaho waddy and other cowboys, Jake backed into the darkness, with the foreman as a shield.

"Stand back, all of yuh!" yelled the Texan. "I'll plug the first hombre that follows me!"

Without a weapon, Buff Riley could do nothing. He thought that Jake would shoot him any moment, but the Texan didn't. He backed up to his sorrel, suddenly let go of the foreman, and sprang to the saddle. Stuck deep with the spurs, his horse leaped out, dodging a zigzag course toward the bank of the sink hole.

"Shoot him!" shouted Buff Riley, snatching his own gun from Dan Barr. "Don't let him get away!"

Suddenly the XYZ hands ripped the night with shots, but Jake Kettle had already gone over the him of the sink hole, and was riding at breakneck speed across the prairie. Buff was first to the saddle of his paint pony to follow, while Dan Barr shouted for his men to stay where they were. But Buff's mind was made up.

Positive that Kettle had stolen the Morgan through friends, the Idaho waddy drove his horse to the bank of the sink hole. Now Steve Hammond was calling for him to halt.

Shots rang out behind, and bullets zipped past Buff, who flopped over the saddle horn. The next moment, his paint pony stretched its legs upon the plain, and he was riding in the purple darkness after his foe.

But ahead of him, Buff saw no one. His ears caught the thudding of hoofs, which soon played out in the night. The sound told the Idaho waddy that Jake Kettle had turned northwest, but that was all.

"He must be headin' for the hills," snapped Buff. "I'll pick him up there, sooner or later. He can't fool me."

CHAPTER VI.

WAR!

GRAY dawn found the young Idaho waddy in the bad lands sixty miles northwest of Dan Barr's headquarters. All night, he had

searched for his foe, and never found him. Now, perched on the highest outpoint that could be found, Buff was exhausted, hungry and thirsty.

His range of vision was ten miles in all directions, over a sea of deep gray gullies and red ridges. Sooner or later, he expected to spy a rider threading through the weird maze of torn country. It was a perfect hiding place for stolen horses. So Buff waited as the sun rose in a blaze of glory in the east, and started its slow climb into the sky.

It was late morning before the Idaho waddy was rewarded. Several miles to the north, the dark figures of two horsemen caught Buff's eyes. They were riding slowly through a deep trough in the hills, as if trying to keep off the sky line and thus prevent being seen from afar. Buff crouched low, watching them like a cougar marking its prey.

The riders slipped into a deep gully and were gone suddenly. About to rise, Buff caught his breath. A third horseman appeared over the route just traveled by the first pair, and he, too, headed into the gulch.

"Somebody ridin' rear guard," chuckled Buff, turning to descend the outpoint. "I've got them now."

Swinging to the saddle of the paint pony in a swale below, Buff struck northward with all the speed possible. It was hard going to keep off high places, all up and down and winding through treacherous arroyos. His mount had worked up a lather before he found the trough in the hills through which the riders had come.

Taking his bearings, Buff steered toward the gully where his foes had vanished, and hopped to the ground. A look at the earth revealed the tracks of three mounts.

"Not so bad," the Idaho waddy chuckled. "The coyotes must have hidden the Morgans somewhere. Now they're ridin' off to find water an' feed."

Guiding his paint pony down the bank of the gully, Buff followed the tracks of the rustlers westward. Soon he found himself entering a deep canyon that had been gouged out of the earth by the rush of water after heavy rains. Earth cliffs rose steeply on either side, and the route twisted ahead like the trail of a snake.

"There must be a river or creek somewhere near," Buff told himself. "This canyon leads into it. That's where those crooks are gettin' their water an' gatherin'——"

He cut his words short as a blast of shots broke the stillness ahead. He heard yells, then the crack of rifles.

"Dan Barr must have found them!" cried Buff, leaping for the saddle. "The skunks will be comin' back hyar any moment!"

Spurring his bronc, the Idaho waddy galloped madly forward, eager to catch sight of the battle which thundered ahead of him. He rounded a turn in the canyon, and ran smack into it. But he was quite unprepared for what met his eyes.

Six hombres in puncher garb were running up the canyon with blazing weapons. Yells rose from their throats. They were chasing a seventh cowboy, who dodged into a group of boulders at the foot of the cliff not twenty yards from Buff Riley.

But in the short space of time, the Idaho waddy recognized the black hat, checkerboard shirt, and woolly chaps of the fugitive. It was Jake Kettle, diving into a shelter from which to fight off the attack.

That was not all. Buff no sooner

spied the six hombres in puncher garb than they saw him. And immediately their weapons turned in his direction. He came out of the saddle with a dive and threw himself behind a rock.

Not one of the six was a member of Dan Barr's outfit. As Buff crouched low, fishing for his six-gun, he realized that he had recognized the leader of the rustlers.

It was none other than his old friend, Strike Benson, owner of the XYZ Ranch!

Now Buff Riley heard the husky Strike's enraged voice crying orders.

"Get them both!" it said. "I know who they are. Don't let 'em get away. They're the two skunks that fought in my ranch yard. They've been followin' us. They must be range detectives!"

"What?" gasped Buff Riley, and he poked his head around the corner of his hiding place to take a shot.

Ahead of him, the six rustlers had spread out across the canyon, each man finding a shelter from which to shoot. They had Jake Kettle penned up in the rocks under the right cliff, and Buff himself was at the left bank, in as bad a position as the Texan. In one glance, Buff saw that he could not retreat without being shot.

Yet he realized that Strike Benson's men could keep Jake and him covered while some of the crew sneaked back down the canyon to climb the cliffs and get above the scene of battle. It was only a question of time before the XYZ punchers would be able to shoot Buff and Jake in the back.

Whiz-z-z! A bullet almost chipped Buff's nose, and he ducked to hiding, his head whirling with excitement.

"Jake Kettle!" he cried out, hoping the Texan would hear him across the canyon. "Are yuh fightin' with me or against me?"

Bullets were smacking into Buff's shelter, and the yells of Strike Benson's men almost drowned out the reply from across the canyon. But Buff heard it.

"I'm fightin' ter recover Dan Barr's Morgans down by the river!" Jake Kettle cried. "I figured that Strike Benson stole 'em last night, an' I trailed two of his hands hyar this mornin'. After I settle with 'em, yuh'll be next!"

"Gosh!" breathed Buff Riley, the mystery clearing from his brain.

For suddenly he realized that Jake Kettle had not planted the fancy quirt in the sink hole north of Dan Barr's headquarters, nor was the Texan a rustler. Buff now knew that he had dropped his quirt at XYZ, forgotten it, and Strike Benson had picked it up.

Jake Kettle must have seen the XYZ owner do that. And when the quirt was found in the sink hole, Jake Kettle realized that Strike had planted it there.

"What a nitwit I am!" growled Buff Riley. "That Texas skunk almost solved this horse-stealin' all by his lonesome. I'll knock the stuffin' out o' him, if I don't get myself killed first!"

Now the bullets were chipping the top of his rock, and from the sound of explosions, Buff could tell that only four of Strike's men were shooting to keep him in hiding. It meant that two of the rustlers had sneaked down the canyon. Soon the pair would be creeping to the rim of the cliff overhead.

"Skunks!" the Idaho waddy snarled, poking a weapon about the corner of his hiding place.

Instantly a chunk of lead creased his wrist, and he jerked the gun back just in time to save it.

CHAPTER VII.

SHOOT-OUT.

UNABLE to rise from hiding, Buff Riley chewed savagely on his lips and waited for the worst, his blazing eyes shifting from the rim of the canyon above him to the opposite rock platform below which Jake Kettle lay with a silent gun. And suddenly Buff realized that it was in his power to keep Jake protected from an attack above.

He could plug any hombre who tried to peer over the rim at the Texan. He wondered if Jake knew that, and whether or not the Texan was thinking about it.

"I ought ter let him get shot," Buff growled. "He'd do the same by me. Why don't he yell out?"

Now Strike Benson's shots were longer spaced, as if inviting Buff to lift his head into view. But the Idaho waddy crouched lower behind his shelter. He could not keep his eyes off the rim of Jake Kettle's cliff, and soon he found his gun aiming in that direction.

"I hate ter do it," Buff told himself. "But I can't let anybody else plug Jake but myself."

Suddenly a shaggy head appeared through the sage on the rock platform of the canyon on Jake's side.

"Look out, Jake!" cried the Idaho waddy, and he fired at the cliff with unfailing marksmanship.

At the same time, there came a shout from Jake Kettle, and Buff heard the boom of the Texan's weapon. There was a scream from the skulker at whom Buff fired, and the fellow's head vanished from sight.

Then Buff heard a rush of air, and something landed behind him with a jolt. Whirling to look, he found that the body of one of Strike Benson's cowboys had come flying down the cliff.

"Gosh!" Buff gasped. "Just as I was shootin' Jake's killer, he must have plugged the second one above my head."

Now he heard Jake's voice ring out.

"Riley!" it called. "I hated ter do that, but I thought yuh'd protect me. We got four o' the skunks left. What are yuh goin' ter do about it?"

"Shoot it out with 'em!" cried Buff Riley. "Let's do it tergether, Kettle. I'm the best bullet-tosser in Idaho!"

"I take all prizes in Texas!" replied Jake Kettle. "Let's go!"

With a roar of rage, Buff Riley darted out from behind his hiding place, six-gun in hand. One of Strike Benson's bullets caught him in the left side, almost throwing him to his back.

Another chunk of lead snatched a handful of hair from his head. Buff's eyes targeted the pair who had fired at him.

Crash! Buff drove a bullet into the chest of a rustler crouching not ten yards ahead of him. And as the fellow dropped, Buff turned his smoking weapon upon Strike Benson, who was diving behind a boulder.

"Yuh skunk!" cried Buff Riley, racing forward to rout the XYZ owner from hiding.

Wham! A slug from across the canyon hit Buff in the left arm and threw him flat.

As he went down, he saw Jake Kettle on his knees, blazing away at the rustler who had just wounded Buff.

"Keep it up, Kettle!" yelled the Idaho waddy, struggling to his feet. "I've got Strike Benson cornered!"

But he saw Jake Kettle take one more shot that pulled down the last rustler in sight, and then the Texan

fell forward on his face, with a groan of anguish.

At that moment, Strike Benson came from behind the boulder, swearing madly, a newly loaded weapon in his hand, which he turned on Buff Riley. But Buff quickly drove a bullet into the XYZ owner's fist, and the loaded gun twisted from his fingers. Strike, shrieking with pain, hurled himself upon the Idaho waddy, whose gun hammer was clicking on empty shells.

Down to earth the pair fell together, Strike Benson on top, fighting like a madman. Weak from wounds, Buff tried to squirm out from under, but he couldn't get away. He saw Strike grab a rock from the ground and lift it high.

"Yuh asked for it!" yelled Buff Riley, and he struck his foe between the eyes with his empty gun barrel.

"Ugh!" Strike Benson's small eyes popped.

He never hurled the rock. He collapsed on top of the Idaho waddy, rolled off and lay shuddering on the ground.

For a moment, Buff lay watching the husky XYZ owner through filmy eyes. The battle was over—two men killed on the cliffs and four rustlers felled in the canyon. But how about Jake Kettle?

Soon Buff was crawling toward the Texan.

"Are yuh dead, Jake?" he called.

The Texan groaned and moved his head. "Did yuh nail the last one, Buff?" he gasped.

"There ain't none left," the Idaho waddy replied, crawling close to his old foe.

"Then come fer me, Riley." Jake Kettle's words were faint. "I'm waitin' fer yuh."

As the Texan's hand reached out to clutch a six-gun butt, Buff Riley's fingers caught it.

"I don't want to fight yuh, Jake," protested the Idaho waddy. "I never did. Yuh got more sand than any critter I ever run into before."

Jake's eyes closed. "The same ter yuh, Buff. Let's be pards, boy. Yuh sartin cleaned up on these rustlin' skunks."

"How are yuh feelin', Jake?" asked Buff, nodding over the Texan. "I think I'm goin' ter faint."

"Me, too, Buff. Don't I hear hosses comin'?"

"Yuh must be dreamin', Jake."

A dozen riders appeared around a bend in the canyon. Yells split the air. And Dan Barr and Steve Hammond charged down upon the late scene of battle. Soon punchers had lifted Buff Riley from the body of Jake Kettle, and were forcing water between their lips.

Dan Barr, searching the Idaho waddy for wounds, looked up.

"Nothin' fatal," he said. "Riley will pull through."

Steve Hammond turned away from the Texan. "Kettle has a good chance, too. A slug missed his heart. We ought to get them back to the sheriff. Which do yuh reckon was givin' information to Strike Benson's rustlin' outfit?"

Buff Riley's eyes flickered. He had heard.

"Neither of us were rustlers, hombres," he said. "We both gunned down the hoss thieves. Me an' Jake are pards."

Dan Barr eyed the Idaho waddy suspiciously as Jake Kettle stirred.

"That's right, boss," he muttered. "If yuh fire anybody, make it me. I caused all the trouble."

"Waal, I swan!" cried Foreman Steve Hammond. "I ain't firin' nobody. An' I hope Dan Barr thinks the same way."

"Don't worry about me," chuckled the gray-haired Dan Barr.

"These boys are goin' back to my ranch house for personal attention. I reckon that Nancy will enjoy nursing them. She said if she was going to marry any one of them, she'd have a hard time choosing."

Buff Riley stiffened and turned to glare at the Texan. "Kettle, yuh skunk," he rasped, "yuh told me that Nancy Barr was daid in love with yuh."

Jake Kettle twisted on the ground, jaw stuck out. "Yuh don't think yuh stand a chance, does yuh?"

"Wait a minute!" cried Dan Barr, pushing both punchers back to earth. "Don't get ter fightin' over Nancy. She's already married. An' her husband will be comin' soon from the East to take her away."

"What?" exclaimed the Idaho waddy, eyes wide with astonishment.

"Sufferin' catfish!" cried the Texan. "The gal double-crossed us both, Buff!"

"An' ter think we almost fell fer her," breathed Buff Riley, settling upon the ground. "Jake, let's both of us never look at a gal ag'in."

"Yuh said it!"

QUIÉN SABE

THE DOG DRIVER'S EXCUSE

It is commonly asserted at the trading posts of northwestern Canada that, in order to drive a team of native dogs successfully, the driver must have a good command of swear words in English, French, and Indian.

The only words in the Indian language that the natives can use to urge their dogs on are those of reproach or entreaty, swear words not being in the native vocabulary.

The Indian drivers, however, make up for this deficiency in their own language by acquiring a varied and strong collection of French and English nouns and adjectives that are never used in polite society.

The dogs understand them and obey quickly the familiar sounds as they roll out of the mouths of their drivers. They know that these sounds, following a command, mean business, and failure to respond would probably bring a sharp touch of the whip.

Some of the dogs are certainly very trying. They will sulk, or loaf, or play sick, and the only way to get any work out of them is to punish them severely when they don't come up to the mark.

An English missionary, who believed that his zeal and his self-sacrifice in living so far from civilization had been rewarded by a change of heart and conduct in his converts, was driving through the woods one day, when he saw one of his Indians punishing a dog. The other dogs of the team were hitched to the sled.

The man whipped the Husky furiously, punched it savagely, and finally threw it down and kicked it with his moccasined foot until he was tired and had to give up.

The missionary remonstrated with the angry man on his ungovernable temper and his cruel conduct. The Indian replied in tones of resignation:

"Missionary, it is no use! You know quite well that I have tried hard to be a Christian, but I give it up, if I have to be a dog driver. No man can be a good Christian and drive a team of dogs."

Indian Chief's White Mother Honored

On Armistice Day, 1931, a monument was dedicated at Fort Parker, Texas, in honor of Cynthia Ann Parker, who, as a child, had been stolen by Indians in 1836, from the fort there.

On the morning of May 19, 1836, Fort Parker, a lonely landmark on the Texas prairie, was raided by six hundred Comanche Indians. The fort was occupied by Elder John Parker, nearly eighty years of age, his wife, and their five married sons and daughters with their children and others, who were all more or less related to Elder Parker—thirty-eight persons in all.

After the massacre was finished, and most of the men and some of the women had been killed, the Indians set about looting the dwellings within the stockade.

Silas Parker, Cynthia's father, his brother, Ben, and their father, had been killed. The elder's wife, known as "Granny" Parker, was pierced with arrows, but she lived one month after the massacre.

Lucy Parker the mother of Cynthia, slipped out of the fort with her four children, but was followed by a group of Indians. They forced her to lift the two older children—Cynthia, nine years old, and John, six—behind a mounted warrior. Then Lucy and the two babies were taken back to the fort.

The years passed. Lucy Parker died. She had escaped with her two young children, but she never saw the older ones again. John, who was brought up as an Indian among his captors, reappeared among white people in the fifties, but nine-year-old Cynthia Ann Parker could not be traced.

In 1864, when Captain Ross and his Rangers attacked and defeated a band of Quahada Comanches after the savages had made a series of murderous raids, they found among them a blue-eyed squaw, the wife of Chief Nocona who was killed in the fight. She was weeping bitterly for her dead husband and for her son, who had disappeared during the battle.

She could speak no English, but it was plain that she was a white woman. It was believed that she was none other than Cynthia Ann Parker.

Captain Ross took her to Camp Cooper and sent for an uncle of the missing girl, Colonel Isaac Parker, to come and identify her. After two hours' talk through an interpreter he was about to give up, when he tried a last resort.

"The girl I am seeking," he said slowly, "used to be known as Cynthia Ann."

The woman patted her breast and repeated joyfully, "Cynthia Ann! Cynthia Ann!"

She had forgotten everything of her past except her given name. She never again saw the boy who had become lost during the fighting, and who became a great warrior and the dreaded Chief Quanah.

For years his name was a terror in the settlements, but the good white blood he had inherited from his mother gained the ascendancy at last.

When he realized that it was hopeless to wage war against the whites, he surrendered to General Mackenzie at Fort Sill, in 1876.

His mother had died in 1864. He took her name and from that time was known as Quanah Parker. He had her body brought to Oaklahoma, and when he died in 1911, he was buried beside her.

Torture Trail

A True Story of the Wild West

By Kent Bennett

Author of "The Kid's Old Colt," etc.

TENSELY listening, Corporal Dennis Driscoll peered into the darkness beyond the corralled supply train. About him, within the defensive circle of covered wagons bulking white and ghostly in the night, battle-exhausted men were sleeping. But sleep was not for him—knowing, as he did, that this might well be his last night on earth.

Yes, he thought grimly, it looked like taps for Captain Thompson and his entire command—Companies A and K of the Twenty-seventh. For they were surrounded by an overwhelming force of Sioux Indians, commanded by Red Cloud himself.

Night had halted the battle which had begun when the Indians surprised the outfit, transporting supplies from Fort Smith to Fort Phil Kearny, and ran off all their stock with the opening volley, while the soldiers were rounding the wagons into a corral. Now, dark hours of waiting were slowly passing.

Alert, his tall, lanky figure crouched in a wagon shadow, the corporal heard a strange sound coming from somewhere out on the flat beyond the corral. His senses sharpened by the danger that lurked on all sides, Driscoll held his breath, trying to locate the point from which the noise came.

Suddenly, as he listened, he heard a sentry call out the traditional army challenge:

"Who goes there? Halt, or I'll fire!"

Enfield rifle in hand, the corporal

ran in the direction of the voice, which came from a guard stationed at the other side of the corral.

Bang! The sentry's gun crashed, a brief yellow flare winking in the blackness.

The sharp report roused every man within the protecting shelter of the circle of covered wagons. All about the inclosure soldiers sprang up in an instant. They were grabbing their weapons, running to their posts between wagons and behind wheels.

In a flash the uneasy quiet of the besieged camp was succeeded by a desperate commotion. Men stumbled in the dark, and there was swearing in sleepy voices.

Corporal Driscoll quickly reached the guard who had fired, a recruit of his own squad.

"What is it?" he asked, peering anxiously over the other's shoulder.

For the mysterious noise had not ended; it continued even a bit louder from somewhere out in the gloom beyond the wagons.

"I don't know, corporal," replied the sentry. "What on earth could it be?"

Only a youth, he eagerly sought the noncom's opinion. For although Driscoll himself was actually as young in years, his lean face showed signs of hard experience as scout and soldier.

Yet at this moment, the corporal was as puzzled as the recruit at his side. He frowned intently, his sharp eyes vainly striving to pierce the gloom.

"It don't sound like a surprise party of Sioux," he muttered. "It's altogether too much racket for that. But maybe a couple of 'em are drunk and stumbling around."

They kept staring into the darkness, nerves on edge with the chilling fear of the unknown, while all around the corral soldiers were likewise peering between wheel spokes and around wagon ends.

The young corporal felt his heart pounding as a tense stillness of waiting gripped the camp, while the strange sounds from without came louder than ever.

Suddenly, in the direction from which the noise came, his eyes made out a dim white shape looming in the night. Driscoll held his breath, his hands tightening on his heavy service rifle.

At the sight of the ghostly figure the recruit involuntarily gasped. He raised his gun, aiming it unsteadily.

"Wait!" exclaimed Corporal Driscoll. "Don't fire!"

At his order, the sentry withheld his finger from the trigger. "Corporal—you think maybe it's a medicine man up to some trick?" he whispered.

Driscoll did not answer. His gaze was fixed upon the strange wavering shape. Gradually its outlines became clearer to his eyes. He made out its long head, its enormous ears. He grinned with vast relief.

"It's only Jasper!" he exclaimed.

"That old blind mule!" With a chuckle, the recruit lowered his gun. "Jasper, dog-gone his hide!"

All in an instant, it seemed, the wandering pack animal became plainly visible. It was stumbling about alone out there, crashing through brush in its noisy efforts to return to camp.

A few of the aroused soldiers began to laugh loudly, as men will after their nerves have been drawn tight in facing unknown peril. Abruptly, a sharp voice silenced them.

"What's going on here?"

Corporal Driscoll turned to face Captain Thompson and his two lieutenants, MacVey and Lane.

"It's just a mule, sir," he answered. "Our old friend, Jasper. The Indians must have shooed him back to camp."

"They don't want him, eh?" growled Lieutenant MacVey, whose speech carried a slight Scotch bur. "He's old and lame, so they think it a joke to dr-rive him back in our teeth—the only r-remnant of our stolen stock."

"He's blind, too, sir," put in Driscoll. "That's why he's making such a hullabaloo out there."

For a moment, the officers peered out into the darkness where the floundering animal kept up its commotion.

"Blast Red Cloud, anyway!" exclaimed Captain Thompson. "He knows he's got us on the hip. That's why he's sent back this poor old mule. Trying to scare us, to get our nerve!"

"Maybe it's a sign," said Lane, the junior lieutenant. "Perhaps he intends to starve us out o' here and——"

The two elder officers glared at him, and he swallowed the rest of his words.

"Go out and get the mule, corporal," Captain Thompson ordered hastily. "Bring him inside the corral and tether him to one of the wagon wheels. Maybe he'll be of some use yet."

The commander's words were to be proved true. For Jasper was destined to play an important part in their fate.

II.

With the first light of dawn, the battle was resumed. It raged furiously throughout the morning. But early in the afternoon, the firing from the Indians mysteriously ceased.

As the lull continued, Corporal Driscoll put down his rifle and relaxed. With a bandanna he wiped the dust and powder stains from his lean face.

"The varmints know they've got us in a trap. They're going to take their own sweet time," he muttered to himself. "They just enjoy chewing us over like a good big cud of tobacco."

Presently, he noticed the three officers of the outfit talking together earnestly. With eager curiosity, he edged closer to them. He made his approach quietly and unobtrusively, knowing he risked a calling-down if observed.

But they were too occupied with their discussion to pay any attention to him. The captain's face was set and grim, his voice low-toned and serious. Lieutenant McVey's speech bristled with rolled r's, as it always did when he was excited. The inexperienced junior officer, Lane, was saying little. He appeared much upset.

As Driscoll had surmised, they were talking of getting reënforcements—of sending a request for help to Fort Phil Kearny. It was the only chance. And yet they agreed that, correctly speaking, it was hardly a chance at all.

For the messenger would have to travel over forty miles through hostile Indian country, over the Big Horn Mountains, with practically every mile alive with red warriors!

"I can't order any man to do that," Captain Thompson spoke gruffly. "How could I?"

"O' course, captain, ye'll call for a volunteer-r," suggested the Scotch officer.

The commander nodded, and Corporal Driscoll's heart began to pound.

The junior lieutenant ran his tongue over his lips. "How about

me, sir?" he asked his superior officer.

The captain nodded again, only more slowly. "I thought you'd offer yourself, Lane. But we can't spare you—there's just we three officers. Thanks."

Then he stepped back a pace and said abruptly: "Line up your men!"

His eyes gleaming with excitement, Driscoll hurried to his own squad. A few moments later, as he stood stiffly at attention, his face betrayed an impatient eagerness.

Captain Thompson grimly looked down the ranks.

"Men," he began, "you know what I'm about to call for, and I reckon *I* know you all well enough to feel sure that there's not a one among you who would fail me. But it's a matter of death, p'raps, and I can't order any man to run right into that. So think it over first!" He paused, then went on deliberately:

"Now who's the man who will volunteer to carry a message to Major Burt at Fort Kearny—and get it there?"

Before he had quite finished, a stir began in the ranks. But the soldier who stepped out first and farthest—because he was all set to do so—was Corporal Dennis Driscoll. A quick cheer for him came from the ranks just behind him.

"All right, corporal." Captain Thompson nodded. "You seem to be elected by popular vote. But have you thought it over thoroughly? Are you all set on chancing it?"

"Long before you made your speech, sir," replied Driscoll.

Captain Thompson stared at him in surprise.

The young corporal grinned, as he explained to his commander: "Begging your pardon, sir, I overheard you and Lieutenant MacVey and Lieutenant Lane talking. And I made up my mind to volunteer right then."

"You—you infernal——" the captain spluttered, but his eyes twinkled. "If any one can make this trip, you're the one, Driscoll. You've just the type of nerve to do it. But remember this—there's no turning back, no matter what happens. Understand?"

"I'll do as much as any man can do," Driscoll said quietly.

The first to shake the corporal's hand and wish him luck was his company commander, young Lieutenant Lane.

Jack Reshaw, the breed French Canadian scout, gave Driscoll his field glasses, a pair of Colts, and some advice.

"Follow Trout Creek south to the Big Horns," he said. "Him longer way, but only safe way. Indians know we'll try to get help from Smith or Kearny, so bucks all on the lookout with every trail covered."

The scout stared up at the sky which was darkly overcast—a rare condition for a June afternoon in the Wyoming high country.

"Weather good for you," he told Driscoll. "Better, she rain." Then he asked, "Take some grub along?"

The corporal shook his lean head. "If I don't get to Kearny before I'm starving, I'll never get there," he said.

Provided with two hundred rounds of ammunition and one of the newfangled Springfield breech-loading rifles, he stowed the captain's dispatch in an inside pocket of his tunic. Then into the center of the camp was led the only animal left for him to ride—that old blind mule, Jasper!

III.

Down off the flat in the bed of Trout Creek, the banks were high, concealing Driscoll from sight of the Indians. From each slope, trees and tall bushes leaned toward one another, their tops interlaced in a green arcade.

Holding a tight rein to keep the limping mule from stumbling and butting its sightless head against rocks or trees, the corporal struck off along the creek bed and disappeared beneath the green arcade as into a tunnel.

The gloom thickened helpfully, as the afternoon darkened with rain clouds. Soon there came a faint pattering on the roof of foliage overhead. After a moment, the rain fell in a deluge that sounded like the thudding of bullets. But he failed to encounter any of the encircling Sioux.

Night came on, black and blinding with rain. Driscoll, dripping wet, urged Jasper along. The darkness hid him from sight of any sentinel who might be posted in the brush, and the monotonous, hollow booming of the rain drowned all sound of his movements.

Throughout the night, he rode on in the pitchy, wet blackness. And although chilled and water-soaked, he was not much concerned with his physical discomfort. For his mind was filled with the dread prospect of Sioux skulking behind him or looming up ahead.

Yet morning found him, safe and unmolested, at the base of the Big Horn Range. He had successfully eluded Red Cloud's band!

Nature itself seemed to rejoice with him. The skies had cleared, the sun was up, and everything was steaming in the warm June rays.

The young corporal hobbled old Jasper to graze. Then he climbed to the top of a foothill and swept the landscape with his field glasses.

The only sign of life he discovered was a number of moving specks in the hazy distance.

"Buffalo," he decided.

Worn out from his long, wet night ride, he lay down on the grass for a moment's rest. It felt good to stretch the kinks out of his legs, and to have the warming sun drive the chill out of his bones.

Yet soon he reluctantly got up again; he couldn't rest for thinking about those moving specks.

Driving Jasper before him, Driscoll clambered up a higher hill. Again he adjusted his glasses and squinted long and hard at the dark dots.

They were moving more actively than before. They were moving excitedly. They were coming toward him! A sick sensation of fear gripped him. They were Indians!

Quickly he counted them—fifteen. They were coming in his direction as fast as their fleet ponies could carry them. Evidently they had sighted him on that lower foothill, when he had stood up against the sky.

What could he do? If he tried to escape from so many on an old blind, limping mule, he'd die the death of a crippled rabbit. And, besides, what a target he'd be, mounted on that white mule!

No, he'd have to make a stand of it, attempt to fight them off single-handed—with the odds fifteen to one against him!

With this decision, he remounted quickly. Lambasting old Jasper with hands and heels, he rode up the foothills, keeping a lookout for protecting cover.

Soon he found a spot that was naturally fortified. It was close to

a grove of aspen, with a bit of a sheer rise to protect him from a rear attack, and a scattering of boulders ahead of him.

On came the Indians! From the color of the feathers in their war bonnets, he knew that they were Sioux—some of Red Cloud's outriders. Yelling their horrible battle cries and brandishing rifles and hatchets, they swept up the hill.

Driscoll knew they were trying to terrify him, to unnerve him so that he couldn't shoot straight. And he had to make every bullet count. His lean face set in grim lines as, dismounted, he rested his rifle across the back of the poor blind mule.

For an instant, he watched the red warriors racing back and forth in a half circle before and a little below him. Then he sighted carefully and fired.

A horse went down and with it, its red rider. Together they rolled over and over in a wild scramble of legs and arms, mane and war bonnet, down the rough slope.

"We got one, Jasper!" the corporal cried.

He was thankful for the company of the old mule that had brought him so far along the trail. The presence of Jasper kept him from feeling utterly alone.

Wild yells came from the savages as they saw one of their number go down. Fiercely they returned the white man's fire. Dust and rock chips flew from the rocks near Driscoll.

The corporal licked his dry lips as bullets whined in the air close to him. With a desperate calm, he drew a bead upon another galloping red figure.

As he took aim over Jasper's back, the faithful old mule gave a sudden convulsive shudder. The corporal's shot went wild and, as he looked down at the pack animal, its legs seemed to fold up, and it crashed to the ground.

Poor Jasper's white hide had been too good a target for the rifles of Red Cloud's riders!

IV.

For an instant, Driscoll stared, stupidly, at the fallen animal. He could hardly realize that the old mule had received a death wound so soon, yet its pitiful feeble kicks told plainly that a bullet had gone home.

Dropping to his knees, he stroked the mule's quivering white side.

"Good old trooper!" he murmured, his eyes suddenly moist.

Heedless of the exultant war whoops of the savages, he patted the poor mule's flank that was going in and out like a bellows.

Yet soon the spat of bullets against the face of near-by boulders grimly reminded the corporal of his own perilous position. Lying prone, he resumed firing from behind the body of the stricken mule.

But the convulsive jerking of the dying animal's legs spoiled his aim. He wasted several bullets, and then ceased firing.

Reaching out his hand, he softly stroked Jasper's sightless, white head. The poor mule drew its last gasping breaths, and then lay still.

Driscoll wondered if the same grim fate would be his. Was he doomed to die alone, a victim of those howling red devils? It was sport for them—this skirmish with a lone white man, on foot and unable to escape.

The young corporal's jaw tightened with desperate resolve. No, this couldn't be the end! Not with the lives of the whole outfit depending on his reaching far-away Fort Kearny!

His lips drawn over his teeth, he peered from behind the dead mule at the savage red riders. Carefully he aimed and pressed the trigger of his rifle.

An Indian swung from his pony like a pinwheel, his feet still locked together, the long feathers of his bonnet sweeping the ground. Then he tumbled, and lay spread-eagled.

"Got another one, Jasper!" Driscoll cried. "Only thirteen left now!"

A quick burst of fire came in answer from the Sioux. And again a bullet thudded into the lifeless body of the poor mule.

The corporal fired as fast as he could at the swiftly moving targets before him. He managed to drop another Indian from his mount.

"Three of 'em down! Maybe that'll discourage 'em," he told himself.

But new fears loomed large in his mind, as the skirmishing went on. He couldn't afford, so early in his journey, to use up too many bullets. And what if the noise of the rifle reports attracted other Sioux? He must get away somehow, before all his ammunition was gone, and before redskin reënforcements arrived.

Slowly and cautiously, firing from behind one rock and then another, he retreated toward the little grove of aspen.

Suddenly his skin tightened all over his body. Some one was behind him!

Driscoll whirled about. His veins chilled at the terrifying sight of a horrible paint-daubed figure, not six feet from him.

The skulking Indian buck, discovered by his intended victim, leaped forward with a fierce war cry, a deadly hatchet upraised to strike

Almost without aiming, the corporal fired point-blank. The warrior's yell ended in a horrible gurgle, and Driscoll dodged his plunging figure as it crashed to the ground almost at his feet.

Unsteadily, he drew a bead on his fallen foe. But he did not need to fire again, for the red man lay still, while the grass about him became stained with crimson.

Shaken by the closeness of his escape, the corporal stared about him for a sight of other enemy figures. But he could see none. They were wary about exposing themselves at short range.

For a moment, he breathed easier, as his watchful eyes scanned the brush, alert for a glimpse of stalking Sioux. Listening intently, he could not hear even the snapping of a twig.

Crouched cautiously in the cover of some undergrowth, he waited tensely. The stillness about him became ominous; it was worse than the nerve-shattering din of savage war whoops.

"What blasted deviltry are they up to now?" he muttered.

Presently he raised his head and sniffed. He smelled smoke. The Sioux had fired the brush!

His heart sank as he faced this new danger. Momentarily he was almost unnerved by the apparent hopelessness of his position. In imagination he saw himself driven from cover like a cornered animal, directly into the midst of Red Cloud's revengeful riders.

Driscoll clenched his teeth. His hands convulsively gripped his rifle. A despairing fury possessed him, a desire to run wildly out from cover into his enemies' midst, to get a few of them before he died!

Better that than to remain still, only to be suffocated.

But soon his calmer sense prevailed. He must make a last desperate effort to elude this trap. What had he promised Captain

Thompson? "I'll do as much as any man can do."

He listened intently to the ominous crackling of burning wood. The thing to do, he decided, was to circle about slowly, endeavoring to find a possible loophole of escape somewhere in the ring of burning brush and timber.

Dropping on hands and knees, he began to crawl through the thick underbrush.

For all their cunning, the red men had not considered the greenness of aspen and the remaining dampness of the undergrowth from the night's heavy rain.

Many of the lighted fires sputtered and fizzled. Instead of being fanned into devouring flames, the set blazes only smoldered, for the most part. There was little fire resulting —just dense, billowing white smoke.

Suddenly, the corporal realized this. And he saw that, unwittingly, the savages had given him a smoke screen to aid his escape!

Breathing a prayer of thankfulness, he pushed on through the grove of aspen. Gradually he worked his way to a thick forest of jackpine which extended down the far side of the slope. Then, unseen, he darted from one pine to another.

Without drawing a shot, he made the descent, until finally he plumped down upon the bank of a deep, swift-running stream.

He paused there to rest and catch his breath. His keen eyes surveyed the country about him, alert for a sign of further danger. But there was no sound or sight of his pursuers. He had won clear!

V.

For the remainder of the day, Driscoll followed the stream up the range, keeping under cover of the overhanging brush. When twilight came, he struck out boldly across the ridge in what he hoped was the direction of Fort Phil Kearny.

With the darkness, a new fear harassed him. What if his sense of direction were wrong? If he had got his compass points mixed from so much dodging about, he might be going away from the fort instead of toward it.

Through the night he trudged wearily on, over many miles of rough, rocky uplands. And every step he took was dogged by the fear that he was going the wrong way.

Lack of food and sleep now made him a trifle light-headed. His success in outwitting the Sioux outriders, his anxiety to get help for his outfit, his accumulating fears—all were feeding fuel to his mind's wild fancies. He became reckless, foolhardy, forgetting the caution which his Indian-fighting experience had given him.

And in early dawn, disaster overtook him.

Without pausing to peer ahead, he circled a knoll and walked directly into a large encampment of Sioux warriors!

For an instant, he blinked his eyes, staring almost unbelievingly at the large group of savages. The overwhelming surprise and shock momentarily stunned him.

The Indians were fully as amazed at the unexpected appearance of the lone white man. Startled, as if by the sight of a ghost, they regarded him with astonishment.

Before his mind was capable of conscious thought, a blind instinct for self-preservation drove Driscoll to action.

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he whirled on his heels and fled. He ran wildly for the cover of the brush, while behind him the aroused

savages shouted and went for their guns.

A mad terror drove him on in his frantic, hopeless flight. With each gasping breath from his tortured lungs, he expected the deadly impact of a bullet in his back.

Nearer loomed the sheltering timber. But now the rifles of the braves began to speak. Despairingly, the corporal heard their first explosions behind him.

Instead of zigzagging in his course, to make himself a more elusive target, he dashed straight on toward the brush. A dozen paces more, and he would reach its shelter.

Suddenly, a sharp pain told him he had been hit! A lead slug had struck him in the foot!

Gritting his teeth, his plunged forward and dived into the undergrowth at the timber's edge. And then, panting and gasping for breath, he turned at bay to fire back at his pursuers.

Fear was succeeded in his mind now by a cold rage which seemed to steady his aim as he drew a bead upon one red figure and then another. He knew only a savage desire to kill every Sioux in sight.

Before the Indians realized that the white man had stopped to make a stand, three of their number had gone down before his blazing gun. Such marksmanship halted their exultant rush for the fugitive's scalp. They scattered, to stalk their quarry with savage caution.

As soon as he recovered his breath, Driscoll began to retreat slowly into the growth of pine. Momentarily he expected that the red men would attempt to dislodge him with a wild, terrifying charge, overwhelming him by sheer force of numbers. If they did, he was determined to die fighting.

Grimly he took stock of his remaining ammunition. More than two thirds of his two hundred rounds was gone, though he still had the Colts with both cylinders filled and a few cartridges to spare.

One thing was certain—he could not stand a siege long from all the warriors in the encampment.

Peering from behind the shelter of a tree trunk, he fired at a Sioux buck, whose skulking figure was vaguely outlined in the gray light. The Indian staggered, and dropped from sight. Driscoll darted back to a farther tree.

For some moments, he kept working his way deeper into the woods, firing only occasionally. He caught few glimpses of the Sioux warriors, and these were at a distance, where the brush was thinner.

Presently he stopped in the cover of a fallen pine. The wound in his foot burned and throbbed. His head ached, and dots swam before his eyes, as he kept a vigilant watch for the approach of stalking braves.

There was no underbrush close by, and Driscoll knew that, if he were alert, none of his enemies could get very close to him without their being seen.

For a little while he stayed quietly in this concealment. Except for the occasional chatter of birds, no sounds came to his ears. The woods about him were completely still.

At last he began to wonder at the unusual silence. He raised himself cautiously from behind the fallen tree, to get a farther view of the surrounding forest. But he saw no signs of life anywhere.

What had become of the pursuing Sioux? Regardless of danger, Driscoll stood up and looked all about him. And then he realized that he was alone in the woods! The savages must have figured that to get his lone scalp would cost them too

dear! Without his knowing it, they had withdrawn.

Tears of joy sprang into the corporal's bloodshot eyes. For the second time he had made an almost incredible escape! Forgetting his wound, he turned and ran at top speed, until lack of breath forced him to slow his pace.

At sunrise, he sighted the peak called Backbone Mountain. Knowing that its top afforded a view of Fort Phil Kearny, he struck out for it, hoping from the summit to get his bearings.

But when he finally reached the top of the peak, he was still bewildered and uncertain. He had never approached Kearny from that direction and although he saw a stockade there below, he couldn't be sure, from that distance, whether the place was a fort at all.

He made his way down the range and nearing the stockade, began to circle it widely. At last he stumbled onto a well-beaten trail. It was a wood road—and Fort Kearny was near!

"I've made it!" Driscoll sobbed, overcome by the realization that danger was past and his mission almost accomplished.

With pounding heart, he started to run down the worn trail toward the stockade. But the reaction caused by his discovery proved too much for him. He swayed dizzily and lost his balance, sprawling in the road.

Exhausted from his ordeals, weak from his wound and lack of food, he was at the point of collapse. Only the constant threat of sudden and terrible death had forced him this far; now his body rebelled from further exertion.

With a tremendous effort, he got to his feet again. He tried to walk, but his legs refused to support him. He had to go forward on hands and knees.

He crawled on for a short distance, with everything whirling before his eyes. Then he sagged to the ground, and knew no more.

One of the fort's wood trains, returning from the pineries, came upon Driscoll's seemingly lifeless body lying in the road. The men jumped down and stared at him.

"Do any of you know him?" asked the officer in charge.

"Yes, sir," spoke up one of the soldiers, after glancing at the unconscious man. "He's Corporal Driscoll, of Company K, of the Twenty-seventh."

The officer went through his pockets and found the dispatch addressed to Major Andrew S. Burt, Fort Phil Kearny. He had Driscoll placed in a wagon, and hastened on ahead to the post.

When the corporal recovered consciousness, he was in the post hospital. Opening his eyes, he raised his head with an unexpected show of strength. All his anxieties sweeping over him again, he questioned an orderly:

"Did Major Burt get the dispatch? Where am I? Has the relief party gone?"

The orderly nodded. "They're on the way."

"So I wasn't too late," Driscoll whispered feebly. "Thank Heaven!" And he relapsed into unconsciousness.

It was hours before he again opened his eyes, and six weeks before he was able to leave the hospital.

When finally he did appear outside, the entire command turned out on the parade grounds to do him honor. He was carried on the shoulders of the comrades whom his hero-

ism had saved from the worst of fates—torture and death at the hands of savage Sioux.

The incidents related in this true story of the West occurred between camp at Trout Creek and Fort Phil Kearny in Wyoming, in 1868. Driscoll set out on his perilous journey at 3 p. m., on June 3rd of that year.

Forts Smith and Kearny had been established to protect the old Bozeman Trail, the first route through the Northwest to the Columbia River, and the very man whose name it bore had been himself murdered by the savages. The whole vicinity was a hotbed of Indian rebellion and depredations.

As a reward for Corporal Driscoll's valor, Captain Thompson had a gold medal struck for him at his own expense. And forty years later, when Dennis Driscoll was an old man living in a northern Wyoming mining camp, Brigadier-general Andrew S. Burt—he had won promotion to high rank in the Spanish-American War—made an official report of the feat here recounted. He paid tribute to the corporal in these words:

"There was not a braver deed done in those old frontier days than Dennis Driscoll's."—EDITOR.

HC

OLD BLUE WORKED ALONE

A FAMOUS cutting horse, known as Bosley Blue, won the reputation of being the only real cutting horse of the Western ranges by doing the cutting all by himself, without a rider. Blue was owned by the Ogalalla Cattle Company, of Nebraska, and flourished during the '80s.

In the fall of 1887, three cowpokes who had received their pay for the summer work, were on their way to a lively town to be fleeced by the gamblers.

As they were riding through the hills, they saw what seemed to be a big cloud of dust whirling over a ridge. There was no wind blowing, and no round-up was going on at that time. So the cowboys became curious to know just what was taking place over those hills. It was out of their way; but, as they were not in any hurry, they decided to investigate.

After riding up a timbered draw and concealing their horses in the brush, they crawled to the top of the ridge and looked over. To their surprise, they saw about fifteen hundred head of cattle rounded up, with a cut-out at one side.

No riders were in sight; but, after looking very closely, the punchers saw a riderless horse trotting among the cattle.

Presently it took after a big steer, which the boys recognized as belonging to the Fiddleback outfit. Bringing the steer out to the side where the cut was, the horse put it out.

The steer didn't like it, and went back. It did this twice and tried it a third time. But when the steer made its last desperate effort to get back into the round-up herd, the horse, which had been quickly recognized as the Bosley Blue, stuck right to its side for about two hundred yards out on the prairie, then threw it down and deliberately sat on it for about ten minutes. When Blue let the critter get up, he trotted off to the cut, apparently quite satisfied with his work.

Old Blue was holding both round-up and cut, and was doing the cutting all by himself. He was often known to do this afterward, and was the only horse, as far as is known, that went through this performance without a rider.

Thet Gun-slingin' Fool

By Ernie Phillips

Author of "Fair Enough, Sheriff!" etc.

HEAVING a strange sigh of relief as he shoved the stack of reward notices back from him, Sheriff Tom Watkins of Skull County tilted back to a dangerous angle in his great swivel chair, threw his feet upon the desk and turned his faded dark eyes toward his feet.

"Whew!" he almost whistled, as with brawny hand he wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead. "She's hot—plumb hot, let me tell yuh." He glanced once again at the sheaf of reward notices which had arrived in his mail during the last few days. "By dang, could I grab me one or two o' them fellers, I'd have enough fer tuh buy up thet Circle Dot Ranch an' put thet fool kid o' mine tuh work."

The old sheriff dwelled idly upon the thought. It had been alarming him for several months past. But shucks, a sheriff had it hard enough making buckle meet end of belt without thinking of buying a ranch for his boy some day, even if it was a ranch that would be sold shortly for back taxes.

Still, bank bandits and pay-roll robbers were running pretty wild in parts of the country. Some of them had pretty big rewards hanging on their heads.

"A feller only has tuh catch one or two of 'em an' he's got mebbe two-three thousand dollars. Gee! With two-three thousand, I could even quit sheriffin'!"

Dreaming of what a glorious event it would be, to come into such a generous chunk of money, Sheriff

Tom Watkins, encouraged by the sweltering heat outside and the cool, refreshing shade within his office, soon dozed off. Once or twice a fly landed on his bulbous nose only to be flicked repeatedly away by a pudgy hand.

And then, jerking erect, the old sheriff was on his feet in an instant, palms clapping gun butts as he stalked grimly out of his office. From up the street a sudden uproar had rudely awakened him.

"Hyar thar! What in tarnation's comin' off hyar, say?" he demanded, as he swept up the creaky board walk toward the Cancan Pool Hall.

He saw a crowd gathering. He heard the roar and crash of six-guns.

"Hyar! Who's stirrin' up all the ruckus in my bailiwick, say?"

The old sheriff lunged into the Cancan just as a youth, tall and slim, with broad shoulders, narrow hips and long legs which made him look as if he were split clear up to the chin, backed out, smoking gun in hand.

For a moment the old sheriff blinked his eyes wildly.

Slowly, the youth with the smoking gun in hand turned. There was a splotch of crimson spreading over the sleeve of his right arm.

"Yuh—Jim Watkins!" thundered the old sheriff, seeing that the gunman was his own son. "What in tarnation's comin' off hyar, anyhow? Answer me, yuh young—yuh young—gun-slingin' fool!"

The sheriff jerked the gun from his son's hand, grabbed the kid by the shoulder, spun him around. "What's the meanin' o' this shootin', say, yuh crazy younker?"

Young Jim Watkins met his father's accusing gaze with a direct stare.

"Them mangy fellers in thar from over Shoshone way started talkin' about yuh, dad. Said yuh wasn't no good as a sheriff, an' I took it as long as I could. Then I told 'em tuh grab iron an'——"

"Shut up!" snarled old Sheriff Watkins. He gave the kid a boot in the seat of his pants, started him down the creaky old board walk. "Haven't I tol' yuh time an' ag'in not tuh pay no attention tuh what any o' these dang cowboys was liable tuh say tuh yuh about me? Haven't I tol' yuh time an' ag'in never tuh start shootin' an' stir up a ruckus like yuh jus' have? Haven't I tol' yuh——"

"Dad, I couldn't jest stand thar an' let them mangy waddies hold yuh up tuh ridicule like thet," the kid protested.

"Shut up!"

"Aw, dad——"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, all right!"

The tall young waddy marched straight into his father's office, hearing muffled chuckles, jeering remarks, and whispered comment going up on either side of him.

"Now, sit yuh down thar, Jim Watkins!" stormed the old sheriff, pointing to a chair in his office.

"Aw, dad, I didn't hurt none of 'em, much. Got Tim Rollins in the wrist an' put Buck Sawyer out of it with a slug in his shoulder an' made thet dang Hank Neville back water, jus' afore I plugged Buster Kellog o' the Flyin' W in the laig an' then drilled thet Dusty Cooke in the arm an'——"

"Shut up, yuh crazy gun-slingin' fool!" snapped the grizzled sheriff. "Seems tuh me like yuh tried tuh clean out the hull dang county. By golly, this hyar gun play on yore part's got tuh stop, younker! This is the third time now yuh've started throwin' lead crazylike——"

"Aw, dad——"

"Shut up! Keep yore mouth

shut! Dang it, yo're just a crazy gun-slingin' fool. Yuh won't work or——"

"Thar ain't none now, dad," Jim Watkins cut in. "All the hands is laid off till round-up time in the spring an'——"

"Shut up!"

The old sheriff took the gun he had snatched away from Jim and jammed it into an open drawer.

"Take off thet cartridge belt, yuh gun-slingin' fool!" he roared. "Thet's all yuh are, just a gun-slingin' young fool! Want to grow up an' spend all yore life on the dodge? Want to grow up an' have all the sheriffs doggin' yuh, ready tuh drill yuh?"

The youth reluctantly unbuckled his wide, heavy, bullet-studded belt, handed it over to his father. He felt his throat tighten as he watched his dad toss it into the drawer beside his six-gun.

The old sheriff kicked the drawer shut with an angry slam.

"Now, I'm goin' tuh do some talkin' tuh yuh, younker," began the officer. "Gosh, Jim, I hate tuh be hard on yuh like this. It's plumb thunder, son!" The grizzled sheriff paused and blinked a tear back from one faded old eye. "Why, what'll Ben Chapman think o' yuh, younker? An' what'll Mary be thinkin' o' yuh? Think she wants tuh marry a gun-slingin' fool like yuh what's allus in some ruckus? Not by a jugful she won't! An' even if she did, ol' Ben Chapman wouldn't let no girl o' his marry no gun fighter like yo're tryin' tuh be."

Jim Watkins, twenty, hard of face, firm of lip, now slightly misty of eye, gulped once or twice. He turned pleading eyes to his father, then stiffened. He would die before he would ask for sympathy.

"Why, every time yuh git intuh one o' these crazy gun-slingin' fits o' yores, I can't pass the bank fer a week, without Ben Chapman glarin' daggers at me!"

Finally the old sheriff stopped. He shook his grizzled head slowly.

"Now yuh git out o' hyar an' don't yuh let me catch yuh stirrin' up no more gun ruckus, younker," he barked. But it was noticeable that the edge and bite of his stern old voice had toned down considerably.

Young Jim Watkins got out.

II.

The days which followed were hard ones for young Jim Watkins. His arm was bandaged for a week. He had occasion to go into Ben Chapman's Cattlemen's National Bank to get a check cashed, a few days after his last gun scrape. Old Ben Chapman, stern, rigid, broad of chest, bulky of frame, stared hard at the kid over the rims of his glasses.

Jim winced. He dreaded to have old Ben Chapman glare so accusingly at him. For Jim dreamed of the day to come, when he would be speaking to Ben Chapman as his father-in-law. He had been going with Mary Chapman for years, ever since he could remember. They had walked to school together, played together, grown up together.

That night, when Jim called at the Chapman house, he noticed that Mary accepted his presence with a cool reserve.

"Aw, Mary, I couldn't help it," he tried to explain. "It—well, it just happened."

She met him with wide, clear blue eyes and a direct gaze.

"Jim, why don't you settle down and try to make something of yourself? Here you are again, wearing

bandages. This is the third time this year that——"

Jim Watkins was hurt. He shrugged in a mute appeal for understanding.

"Mary," he finally said. "I'm sorry. But, gee! I couldn't help it!"

"You'll get killed some day, picking a gun fight with every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes along. Oh, I know all about it—dad told me, soon's he got home."

It proved a very uncomfortable evening indeed. But eventually Mary switched the subject from Jim Watkins and his gun-slinging tendencies to other topics.

They parted, still friends, but with Jim Watkins firmly impressed with the fact that his gun fighting would have to cease, if he ever expected his rope to fall over Mary's bonnet.

He made it a point to be in front of Ben Chapman's bank almost daily. Every ranchman who entered town went to Ben's bank. Young Jim Watkins approached them all, asking for jobs on their spreads.

"See me when the grass comes," said one.

"Laid all my hands off till round-up time," came from another.

"Ain't needin' no hands right now, Jim. Later on, maybe. I'll keep yuh in mind," promised a third.

And so it went, day after day, until, finally, the sheriff's son had been refused employment by every ranchman in the district.

He was baffled at this. And then it came to him. He overheard whispered conversation between them, as they gathered in pool rooms and barber shops.

"Goin' plumb wild, thet Watkins kid. Just a gun-crazy young galoot," one of them said.

"Allus in trouble," agreed another. "He hit me up fer a job, but I don't hanker fer tuh have my bunk house loaded with gun fighters. I'll do the fightin' on my spread."

"Thet's me," chipped in a third. "When I hire 'em, I want 'em as cowboys, not lead slingers."

Young Jim Watkins spent a restless night. So they had decided to pass him by, eh? So they wouldn't hire him because he was a gun fighter?

The youth found it a pretty bitter dose to swallow. He shook his head and rolled and tossed. But next morning, his mind was made up.

He would leave Red Gulch and Skull County entirely. He would drift over into a strange range, see if he couldn't obtain a job on some distant spread. He would go away and find a place where they didn't know him. There he would be able to land a job.

"Pshaw, son, yuh don't need tuh go driftin' off like this," said Sheriff Watkins, when his son explained things to him that morning. "Pshaw, I reckon while I'm sheriff hyar, I'll have enough fer us tuh live on right well, Jim."

Jim looked deep into his father's rugged old face and smiled.

"Gee, dad, I know!" he muttered brokenly. "But, shucks! Mebbe if I leave town fer a while, things'll be best fer the both of us."

The old sheriff jerked his son by the arm.

"Say, it ain't thet Mary Chapman's turned yuh down——" he started.

"No, not thet, dad," came the slow reply. "I reckon Mary an' me is—— You know what I mean."

The old officer shook his head grimly, opened a drawer in his desk, handed his son his cartridge belt and six-gun.

"Yuh might need these, driftin' intuh strange land, younker," he said.

"Thanks, dad!" Jim took his father's wrinkled old hand and wrung it fondly. "Yo're a dad among dads, that's what."

Blinking back the mist in his eyes, young Jim Watkins went out to his horse, swung easily into the saddle, and kneed the wiry little buckskin down the dusty main street which emptied into the mesquite beyond.

Sheriff Tom Watkins watched until the horizon swallowed rider and mount.

"Dang it! If I had enough tuh buy up thet Circle Dot land they're goin' to peddle cheap at the back-taxes sale, thet younker wouldn't have tuh go meanderin' off intuh strange range!" The old sheriff shuffled back into his shabby office.

III.

A long period of calm settled over Red Gulch, during the weeks which followed. The county seat of Skull enjoyed a peace seldom experienced before in its stormy history.

"Sho' makes a difference hyar, when thet gun-slingin' young fool son o' Sheriff Watkins's is out o' town," said Bill Tate, the postmaster. Dang me! Fer a while, it seemed like every time yuh heard a shot, yuh'd look up an' find thet young scallawag pumpin' lead."

"He sho' never missed a chance at gun play," agreed his only assistant, grabbing up a pouch of mail.

He opened it. A single package of mail flopped out on the sorting table. It was a familiar package. Similar ones had been coming into the Red Gulch post office almost every week for the past two months.

The assistant grinned. "Wonder what the sheriff does with all these hyar reward notices he gits, huh? Gosh, bet yuh he's got a ton o' them, since winter come on!"

The postmaster looked serious. "Lots o' road agents prowlin' the country this year. Wouldn't surprise me none if they was tuh drop in an' pay Red Gulch a visit some one o' these days."

The assistant eyed his superior suspiciously.

"Yuh mean——"

"Yeah, Ben Chapman's bank," the postmaster finished for the other. "Them last bank statements showed Ben's got a hull heap o' cash on hand. When these road agents an' bank bandits see them notices, they sometimes don't lose no time gettin' intuh action, yuh know."

The assistant nodded. Of course, the Cattlemen's National Bank would be carrying a lot of cash right now. Ranchmen had shipped to market heavily during the early fall season. Thousands of dollars had been dispatched to Red Gulch accordingly from commission agents and packing houses at Kansas City, Wichita, Fort Worth, and Omaha.

"Well, let's hope fer the best, anyhow," and they went on with their mail.

Even old Sheriff Watkins couldn't quite understand the queer calm which hung over the little cow town. But it remained for Ben Chapman to explain it to him.

The sheriff had gone into the Cattlemen's National to deposit a county warrant. Old Ben himself happened to be in the teller's cage.

"Hear from that son of yours much, sheriff?" he asked casually.

"Nary a word, Ben."

Chapman grunted. "Sure been nice and quiet around here, since he drifted out. By golly! It's getting so a fellow can even sleep nights without being awakened every ten minutes with his six-gun banging away."

The old sheriff flinched, but said

nothing. It isn't wise to argue with a banker. Sheriff Watkins had learned that long ago.

And so the days passed with that queer peace and calm still hanging over the old sheriff's bailiwick.

Then, about a week later, Bill Tate, sorting out the incoming mail which had been brought in on the Pecos stage, chanced upon a letter which caused his eyes to gleam oddly.

"Lookit hyar, Jeff," he said to his assistant. "Ain't this thet Watkins kid's writin'?"

Jeff Sanderson took one glance at the envelope.

"It's thet gun-slingin' fool's writin', shore as I'm standin' hyar."

"Humph! Funny how a gal like Mary Chapman'd be interested in a gunman like Jim Watkins." And the postmaster dutifully poked the letter in question into the Chapman box.

IV.

It was ten days later when a lone rider, dust-covered, trail-weary, and tired, turned his wiry little pony off through the mesquite and picked his way toward the scraggly little town of Red Gulch.

It was high noon, and the sun, even though it was still early spring, was beating down upon the desert in merciless manner.

As he jogged leisurely along, young Jim Watkins smiled to himself.

Gee, it felt good to be coming back home again! In his clear blue eyes there was an eager gleam. As the buckskin carried him through the mesquite, he wondered if things would be the same around Red Gulch.

He hadn't heard from a single soul since he had left. He looked older, heavier, and there was a firmness about his face which hadn't been there, when last he had seen Red Gulch.

"Most nigh noon, Snippy," he said to his buckskin. "We ought tuh git thar jus' in time tuh catch Ben Chapman alone at the bank, 'cause his assistant allus goes out from one till two o'clock fer lunch. Bet yuh Ben's eyes'll pop, when I plank down this hyar hundred-dollar check an' deposit it tuh my account!"

The wiry little buckskin carried him slowly through the mesquite flats. Shortly they would turn upon the rough wagon trail, which led into Red Gulch's lone main street, and put the mesquite behind.

As they neared Red Gulch, Jim felt his pulse quicken. He thought of his dad, and of Mary. He wondered if she would be glad to see him again, after his long absence. He wondered if she had forgotten the last time they had been together, that bandage on his arm.

"She won't see me with no bandages on this time, Snippy!" he chuckled to his horse.

Finally they reached the edge of the tiny little cow town. They found Red Gulch practically deserted. A stray mongrel dog limped across the dusty street, favoring a crippled leg. Here and there Mexicans lounged sleepily in the shade, sombreros pulled across their foreheads to keep the sun glare from their eyes as they dozed.

"Shore is a plumb peaceful town, Snippy," reflected Jim Watkins.

His hands went to his guns. He was on the verge of taking off his cartridge belt, stuffing it into the saddlebags.

"They're liable tuh think I come back fer tuh shoot up the town, if they catch me wearin' these——"

And then his hands stopped, not an inch from his guns. His eyes

narrowed, his lips went tight. For up ahead a block, directly in front of the Cattlemen's National Bank, a band of strange riders had drawn their horses to a halt. Young Jim Watkins kneed his buckskin to a slow walk, gazed ahead though narrowed eyes.

He saw one of the riders dismount, leave the reins hanging to the ground. He saw the other riders reach slowly toward their saddles, then he caught the flash of sun against rifle barrels!

"By golly! They're goin' tuh rob the bank!" exploded Jim, sliding swiftly from the saddle and slapping his buckskin across the rump. "Git away from hyar, Snippy!"

Jim Watkins was the only person on the street except the riders up ahead. He slid over behind a post, sneaked up a few feet, dropped in behind another post.

Then, when he was scarcely sixty feet from the corner where those riders had by this time spread out so that they guarded the entrance to the Catleman's National Bank, Jim saw one of them, gun in hand, but holding it slightly behind him so as to not attract attention, enter the bank.

His heart jumped. His face went hard and almost white.

Perhaps ten seconds after the one man had entered the bank, a shot rang out to disturb the quiet of Red Gulch's peaceful noon hours.

"By cracky! Thet young Watkins kid is back in town!" one of the pool-room loafers cried out, upon hearing the shot.

Jim Watkins, creeping stealthily up past the pool hall, hardly heard the words.

Then he ducked in behind a post. A rifle cracked. A bullet tore out a splinter of wood six inches above Jim's hat crown.

"Dang, they've spotted me," he snapped.

Realizing this, he plunged into action just as the man who had entered the bank came dashing out, two sagging canvas bags in his hands—bags loaded with gold, silver, and currency, Jim Watkins knew!

"Drill thet danged kid thar!" shouted one of the outlaw band.

Fully half a dozen rifle bullets whizzed through the air, singing fierce messages of death as they sped past Jim Watkins.

Storekeepers were at their doors, peering out. Restaurant owners and saloon men took one look, backed away, anxious to keep out of the possible line of fire.

Some of them in their one, sweeping glance, recognized Jim Watkins, saw him fanning his guns like a man suddenly gone mad——

"Thet danged gun-slingin' fool is back in town again!" they yelled to one another. "Somebody's sho' goin' tuh catch thunder!"

Bullets pelted back and forth. Jim Watkins, casting fear aside, wondering why his dad didn't rush out of his office to join him, was carrying on a lone fight.

One of his shots reached its target, felling a horse. The bandit sprang from the saddle, swore, turned, and drew a bead on Jim Watkins. Jim, ducking back and forth, weaving and bobbing from post to post, proved a teasing, almost unhittable target.

Once again Jim's six-gun rang out its fierce message.

The outlaw who had left the saddle clutched at his stomach, wilted, sank slowly to the ground.

Five men were left. One of them whirled his horse, whipped out his six-gun after throwing his rifle away in rage.

"Git thet danged fool kid, afore he has the hull town after us!" the bandit cried, pouring shot after shot at Jim Watkins.

Jim got in another hit. A bandit toppled from the saddle, his violent oath echoing and reëchoing above the din and roar of hot gunfire.

Jim had by now wormed his way up in front of the Cancan Pool Hall.

"Throw me—a—gun. Load these hyar—fer—me!" he panted, tossing his own guns, empty now, hot, smoking, through the opened door.

Shortly a loaded six-gun was returned to him. He flung himself grimly, fearlessly into the fight, wondering why his dad wasn't out there, why his dad's deputies, why other men in town didn't come out and give him a hand.

"Give me—'nother—gun! Load this un!"

Once again he exchanged guns, and another outlaw was put out of the scrap. Bullets rattled like hail against tin roofs. Window panes were shattered. Buildings riddled.

Now and then Jim caught sight of a horror-stricken face peering out at him from a window. Now he felt death tug at his shirt, bite at his wrist, lift his hat from his head, clip a shock of curly, unruly red hair from his head.

"Load 'er up—again! Give me—'nother gun!"

Only two outlaws were left. Both were pumping lead as fast as they could, trying to cut him down, but although Jim Watkins was spun half around, when something crashed against his left shoulder with a thud that almost lifted him off his feet, he didn't go down.

"Dang it! Let's make a break fer it!" yelled one of the outlaws, and whirling his horse, he started streaking off up the street.

Jim Watkins dropped quickly to his knee. He took long, careful aim, drawing a sure, desperate bead upon that fleeing bandit. For he was the one who carried the money.

And then, just as he pulled the trigger, something exploded above his eyes. Jim Watkins fell back, rolled on the creaky board walk a time or two, then lay quite still, not a muscle in his long, gangling body quivering.

V.

When he awakened, he was in strange surroundings. He rubbed his eyes sleepily, started to roll over. Flashes of pain streaked through his body. Then it came back to him.

"Are yuh—are yuh all right, younker?"

Jim looked up into the face of his dad. "Sure, dad! Gee! Did they—get away?"

"Did they git away? Did they git away? Huh, I should say they didn't, younker!" chirped the old sheriff proudly. "Shucks, younker, yuh sent three o' them tuh their graves with their boots on, an' crippled the rest o' them! Younker, time we finish collectin' all the reward money they's out on them bandits, why say—thet Circle Dot's our spread, younker, an' we'll be running a thousand head o' steers on it! Shucks, I been two days checkin' up on all the reward money them coyotes is worth—they're the ones who've been robbin' all these banks around hyar fer so long."

Jim Watkins seemed to relax. "I'm glad, dad, they didn't get away. I hated tuh come back intuh town an' start shootin', but when I saw them tappin' Ben's bank—shucks, I guess I was a crazy gun-slingin' fool again. Yuh see——"

The sheriff cut in. "Younker, it's a dang good thing yuh got intuh

town when yuh did. Them outlaws was plumb cagy, they was. They sent a fake message down hyar this mornin' from Cedar Gap, tellin' me there was a murder committed up thar last night an' thet I had tuh fetch a posse o' Red Gulch men tuh help them Cedar Gap fellers run 'em down.

"Well, when I got tuh Cedar Gap, them outlaws was jus' swarmin' intuh Red Gulch hyar. Thet's why there wasn't nobody much hyar tuh help yuh out, younker. But gee! Them what saw it said yuh shore was slingin' lead intuh them bandits!"

"Was he? Shucks! Jus' a gun-slingin' fool, thet's what!" chipped in Bill Tate, the postmaster, who had watched the fight from behind barred windows. "Why, shucks! If it hadn't been fer Jim hyar——"

Then he paused, and turned. Picking up his hat, he slouched smilingly from the room. The old sheriff, too, found it necessary to depart.

For Mary had entered the room, Mary Chapman, eyes misty but glad —eyes which only were for the gun-slinging young fool stretched out on the bed there.

At sight of her, Jim couldn't hold himself.

"Gee, Mary!"

"Jim, boy!" Her eyes glowed. "I got your letter, and was waiting!"

A pair of bandaged arms went out toward her. At that moment, old Ben Chapman himself entered the room. He took one look, then backed gracefully out again.

WRENCH

ESKIMOS REVERT TO ANCIENT RITES

RETURNING trappers have reported that, in various parts of the barren lands of Canada in the far Northwest, the Eskimos are returning to the faith of their fathers.

Those who live in scattered tribes throughout this vast area have been staging the barbaric tribal ceremonies that were peculiar to their race in times gone by. Some of these rites are savage and horrible in the extreme, although it is said that, so far, no human lives have been involved in the ceremonies.

A large patrol of the Northwest Mounted has been sent to the region to investigate.

The Eskimos along the Northwest coast have long been friendly with the white men, and have rendered much valuable service to travelers. It is said that this trouble has been caused by the white trappers, who have been pushing farther and farther into the territory which the Eskimos consider as exclusively their own.

This has brought about friction between the two races, and has resulted in the abandonment by the Eskimos of all the customs of the white man.

The elders of the various tribes have destroyed supplies of food brought to them by white officials, saying that it is meant to kill them all off. They tell their people that the white men's effort to improve their condition is a pretext to get into their hunting grounds.

It is now feared that, if the white trappers persist in their methods of invasion, some of them may never get back to their own country.

It is hoped that the Mounties will bring about a peaceable settlement. Warnings have been sent to the white trappers, and if they don't heed them, the patrol will have its work cut out.

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, folks, how do yuh feel about a few songs tuh-day? L'arned all the other ones I sung tuh yuh?

Git out all yore instruments an' gather 'round, while I tune my ol' fiddle. Yuh know, it's almost a year now thet this hyar Corral has been gettin' tuhgether each week. I'm beginnin' tuh feel as if we're creatin' a kind o' legend already. We ought tuh have a right dandy collection, when we git through. Mebbe we'll succeed in addin' somethin' tuh the hist'ry of American folklore. An' it would be all of us thet are doin' it, too.

Jest remember thet every time yuh send in some interestin' bit o' song info, an' I print it, yo're addin' somethin' thet's likely tuh be permanent.

But I reckon the ol' fiddle is tuned now, an' I reckon yo're all more interested in havin' songs this minute than anything else, when yuh come right down to it. So hyar goes!

A couple o' weeks ago, I gave yuh a song by E. A. Brininstool. Remember I told yuh thet he's been writin' these hyar songs for a long time, an' started writin' 'em as a result of associatin' with range riders, an' just listenin'. Waal, hyar's another right nice song thet he says he likes hisself:

THE LAST DRIVE
By E. A. Brininstool

Beside his sagging door he sits and smokes,
And dreams again of old trail days, long gone.
His eyes are dim, his form is bent and old,
And silvered are the locks about his brow.
He hears again the thud of pony hoofs,
The clash of horns, the bellowing of herds,
The shouts of riders and the pant of steeds,
And creak of saddle leather as they ride!
He sees the dust clouds hover o'er the trail,
Where, snakylike, the herd winds on and on.
He sees broad-hatted men—bronzed, fearless, bold,
And as he listens, faintly to his ears
Is borne the echoes of an old trail song;
While to his nostrils floats the scent of sage
And greasewood, cactus, and mesquite, that seems
To lure him back among his ranges wide!

'Tis night—and now he sees the bedded herd
Beneath the open canopy of heaven,
While hardy night guards keep their vigil drear!
The stars gleam out, and yonder rugged buttes
Loom strange and weird and dim and spectrallike.
The wagon top shines brightly by the stream,
And in the flickering camp fire's feeble glow,
He sees the silent forms of old range pals
In dreamless slumber in their blanket-beds.
The coyote's melancholy wail floats in
Upon the silent, pulseless summer air,
While overhead on steady tireless wings,
The nighthawk wheels and circles in its flight;
And down below, the babble of the stream,
Makes low-crooned soothing music, rippling by.

Morn comes, with crimson bars of light that reach
To guild the buttes and tint the east with fire!
The lark's song echoes clear and sweet and strong
Upon the morning air; the range grass gleams
And glitters with its diamond-tinted dew,
And all the great wild prairie springs to life!
Again he sees the straggling herds move on
In broken lines, and in his dreams he seems
To feel the broncho's steady, tireless pace,
That carries him upon his last long ride,
Which ends in sleep beside the sunset trail.

It seems tuh me thet thet song gives yuh a right nice picture o' the Western ranges at their best. I reckon all you folks would like to be settin' peacefully in the sun some day and thinkin' back tuh days o' workin' on the prairies.

Howsomever, there are a good many cowboys thet started out an' met with the more dangerous side o' the life, an' never lived tuh have many mem'ries. Thar's an old song called "Utah Carl's Last Ride." It's the song of a gallant young cowboy who didn't live tuh have mem'ries o' his own, but who has lived in the mem'ry of every ranch out West.

It's sometimes called "Utah Carroll's Last Ride," too.

A long time ago, the Range Boss published this hyar song in the Wranglers Corner, an' considerin' the number o' requests that have been comin' tuh me, I reckon it's a plumb pop'lar piece of music. Several folks have sent in copies of it for me tuh publish ag'in, an' I sure thank 'em. Hyar it is:

UTAH CARL

And as my friend, you ask me what makes me sad and still,
And why my brow is darkened like the clouds upon the hill,
Run in your pony closer, and I'll tell to you the tale
Of "Utah" Carl, my pardner, and our last ride on the trail.
We rode the trails together and we rode them side by side.
I loved him like a brother and I wept when Utah died.
We were rounding up one morning, and our work was almost done,
When on the side the cattle started on a frightened run.

'Neath the saddle on the pony which the boss's daughter rode,
Utah had that very morning placed a brand-new blanket robe,
That the saddle might ride easy for Lenore, his little friend,
And it was that red blanket that brought him to his end.
Now the blanket was a-dragging behind her on the ground;
The frightened cattle saw it and charged it with a bound.
Lenore then saw her danger and turned her pony's face;
Then, leaning in the saddle, tried the blanket to displace;
But in leaning lost her balance, fell in front of that wild tide.
"Lay still, Lenore; I'm coming!" were the words that Utah cried.
His faithful pony saw her and reached her with a bound.
I thought he'd been successful and raised her from the ground;
But the cinches of his saddle had not been felt before,
And his back one snapped asunder, and he fell beside Lenore.
Then, picking up the blanket, he swung it over his head
And started across the prairie. "Lay still, Lenore!" he said.
Well, he got the stampede turned and saved Lenore, his friend;
Then turned to face the cattle and meet his fatal end.
His six-gun flashed like lightning; the report rang loud and clear.
As the cattle rushed and killed him, he dropped the leading steer.
And on his funeral morning I heard the preacher say:
"May we all meet Utah Carl in the round-up far away!"
Then we wrapped him in a blanket and told his little friend,
For it was that red blanket that brought him to his end.

I reckon we got room for one more little song. Hyar's one thet was sent in on a newspaper clippin'. I don't know who wrote it, but I reckon maybe yuh'd like to hear it:

THE LITTLE CAYUSE

My little cayuse is the pride o' my life,
Though he isn't so long on looks;
And he knows a lot more than most college guys know,
If he never has read any books.
He can run a good race; he can set a good pace;
He won't let no one ride him but me;
And though some fellers calls that plain cussedness,
I just calls it loyalty.

My little cayuse ain't no use for a home;
The prairies invite him away.
With me in the saddle he's willin' to roam
A year just the same as a day.
And I sings him a song, as we ambles along,
Just happy to be on the trail;
And he answers me, too, when I converse with him,
With a flick of his ear or his tail.

My little cayuse is a pal tried and true;
With him I'm not willin' to part.
He nickers with joy when I calls him each morn,
And that is a trick I calls smart.
He comes when I speak, any day in the week;
On him I can always depend.
And there's nary a guy who's entirely alone,
With a little cayuse for a friend.

I never git tired o' publishin' songs about hosses. They're the best friends we got. No man of the range could exist without 'em. So I hope thet yuh like 'em, too, cause there's still a pile o' songs thet we kin sing.

I reckon yuh got enough songs fer tuh-day howsomever, but don't fergit as how I'll be back next week, folks, r'arin' tuh sing some more!

Western Pen Pals

Conducted by Sam Wills ~ Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THAR'S so plumb many letters waitin' hyar ag'in, thet I'm jest goin' tuh jump right in tuh the business o' the day. Hyar yuh are, folks, all kinds o' pals, waitin' tuh make friends with yuh!

FROM THE WEST

Most o' these folks can give yuh interestin' info of the West:

DEAR SAM: Just to let you know that any Pen Pal wishing to know about the West, about cowboys and cowgirls, and the ranches they live on; and about Indians; and movie studios; and Western beaches, can just write to me. I lived out West once—on a big ranch in Colorado. So I can answer all sorts of questions. I've also made auto trips from Michigan to California, and will be glad to give details of the route.

JOE LASH, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and love all sports, especially horseback riding. I'd love to have Pen Pals from all over the United States. I live on a large cattle ranch in the hills. Every fall and spring I go with the cowboys to round up the cattle. I can ride, rope, and shoot very well. I have two horses of my own—Midnight, a black stallion, and Buck. Come on, girls, and write to me.

JERRY FOWLER, OF IDAHO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen and live on a farm. I would like to have a Pen Pal of my age from a city in the East. I have been in the West and know a good deal about ranches and about different parts of Texas. I also know lots of Western songs. S. A. TURNER, JR., OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I've punched cows from the Mexican border to Canada and north. I've wrangled horses by the hundreds for the company known as Hansen Pack. I've worked in the woods of Washington, through Idaho, and back. I've played as forest ranger and fought fires here and there. But my latest occupation is tramming in the old Brown Bear. This is a coal mine high in the Teton Valley on the border of Idaho and Wyoming. Here's hoping to hear from some Pen Pals.

ERIC MAYBEE, OF IDAHO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a Westerner and haven't much to do right now; so I'd like to hear from some folks in the East who want Western info.

JESSE PEDERSEN, OF UTAH.

DEAR SAM: I'm fifteen years old and have been working on my uncle's ranch for three years straight, so I could tell my Pen Pals a little something about white-faced dogies and such.

BOB BOLLING, OF COLORADO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of thirteen in the eighth grade. I hail from the wild West and am looking for Pen Pals from all over the world. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps and info.

BLONDIE, OF MONTANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a live wire from the West and am looking for Pen Pals all over the world. I am fifteen and a brunette. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps. MISS LIVE WIRE, OF MONTANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fifteen and would like to have some Pen Pals from all over the U. S. A. I live on a ranch. I ride horses and often work with cattle. I can give info about this part of the country, and will exchange snaps with any one.

TOM MANNING, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of twelve and am fond of outdoor sports such as baseball, basketball, and swimming. I'd like Pals from all over the world. I'll tell any one who writes to me all about creek life.

VIRGINIA BRUCE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of thirteen and fond of outdoor life. I'd be more than glad to tell Pen Pals all about this part of Texas. NETTIE DANIEL, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonely cowboy out here in Nebraska, and would like to hear from my mother who lives in New York, and also Mr. W. J. Falbot, of New York. I hope they'll write if they see this. I'd also like to hear from a few Pen Pals.

MARTIN BENJAMIN, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I'd like you to get me a few Pen Pals. I am a cowboy, as some people call them, though I prefer to say cowhand. I am twenty-six and expect to go East this coming fall, so I'd like to make some friends there. I'll answer all letters received, so please write.

CECIL ROBINSON, OF WYOMING.

JOB INFO

Lots o' folks are still lookin' for jobs. Mebbe yuh folks can help some of 'em:

DEAR SAM: As my husband must have at least a year's rest in a different climate, preferably that of New Mexico or Arizona, I wonder if I could get some work out there. I must have work in order to support both of us until he gets well. So if any one knows of any work please let me know at once, for we can't afford to leave this place without some sort of assurance of my finding work wherever we go. JEAN, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: My brother and I would like to get a job on some ranch, preferably in Texas. We would also like to exchange letters with some Western Pan Pals. We are sixteen and eighteen years old.

JOE AND FRANK PRINGLE, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to hear from some real cowgirls from all over the West, and

along the Pacific coast. I am eighteen years old. I'd like to get a job on a ranch for the spring and summer. Am a lover of the outdoors and can ride and shoot.

HELEN THOMAS, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eighteen. I like to hunt and trap. I wish you'd put me in touch with some trapper in the mountains, who might want a pardner. I'd like to go in partnership with some trapper in the Northwestern States, or in Canada. I'll do my share of the work; and I'm not a hard fellow to get along with. I know quite a bit about trapping; I've done it ever since I was big enough to run around the woods and along the creeks.

LEO UHLRICH, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young married man of twenty-eight with a small family, and am very much interested in ranching and farming. My father and I are factory workers, but he was a good farmer before that. We'd like some info on how to get a farm or ranch job. Maybe some Pen Pals would know of some rancher or company that rents farms on a sharing basis. Anyway, we'd like some info.

E. M. WEST, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm looking for a job out West, especially on a ranch. I am sixteen years old, and I love outdoor life. If you or some of the Pen Pals could get me in touch with some horse or cattle rancher, I would appreciate it very much. I can ride pretty well, and also shoot a gun, rifle, or revolver.

FELIX PUCA, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonesome boy of sixteen and would like to get some info of ranches and cattle raising. I've been in the cow country of Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. I would like to get a job out there, too. I'm crazy to be a cowboy. If you or any of the Pen Pals know of ranchers who might give me work, I would like to hear from them as soon as possible. And I'd like to hear from any Pen Pals.

WILL JAMES, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: I'm sixteen years old and would like you to try to get a job in Texas as a cowboy. I love the West. I'm a good rider and can shoot. I hope a Texan will write to me.

HENRY LESNOCK, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: Could you get a big husky Texas boy a job on some cattle ranch for about fifteen or twenty dollars a month? I'd like to get work in New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona, or Nevada. I am a good worker and can ride and rope fairly well. I'm sixteen years old.

WAYNE KNOWLES, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of sixteen, and my parents are dead. I'm living with my married sister, and I would like to know if you or any of the Pen Pals could give me info concerning a job out West. I was born and reared on a farm so I know about horses and cattle. I'd like to get in touch with some ranch owner out West.

JERRY O'BRIEN, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to hear from some forest rangers in Colorado, or any Western State. I would like some info, as I intend to be a ranger myself in the near future. I am willing to trade info and snaps.

WILLARD THOMPSON, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen, and I would like to get a job on a ranch somewhere in Texas. I can shoot and ride well. I have a friend who'd like a job, too. His name is Walter Sendra.

MATTHEW TABA, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SIR: I would like to get some letters from cowboys who would tell me about working conditions in the West. A friend and I would like to get a job out there. I am sixteen years old.

LAWRENCE DANIELS, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen and would like to get a job on a ranch somewhere in Texas. I am good at riding and shooting.

EDWARD GABRIEL, OF ILLINOIS.

TRADIN' AN' SUCH

Some o' these folks want tuh exchange things; but a lot of 'em are just lookin' for ol' Western stuff:

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of twelve, and I am longing to be a cowboy. I hope some cowboy will write to me, especially one who has old guns, boots, ropes, torn chaps, or sombreros to spare.

MAX RITCHIE, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of seventeen and would like to have Pals from all over the West. I will exchange articles, curios, and

snapshots. Interested in all sports. Every one, write.

H. Snyder, of West Virginia.

Dear Sam: I'm thirteen. I'm much interested in the West and would like to know just what it's like to-day. I would like to have Pen Pals all over the world, but especially from the West. I would also like some old things like broken guns, chaps, et cetera. Come on, Pen Pals, and write.

C. J. Westerhelweg, of Michigan.

Dear Sam: I am a boy of sixteen, and I want some Pen Pals from the West, especially those who have old guns, or holsters, and ropes to give away. I'm a good shot, and I'm longing to be a cowpoke, in Wyoming or Texas. I can play a guitar.

John Marin, of Pennsylvania.

Dear Sam: I am a boy of seventeen and want Pen Pals from old Montana, Cuba, Spain, and Texas. Can give info of West Virginia's many resources and industries, and also have books, stamps, pictures, et cetera to trade. Would like to get hold of old broken firearms.

Medford Price, of West Virginia.

Dear Sam: I'm a boy of fifteen, and I wish I could get a lot of Pen Pals. I will swap books, all kinds of magazines, stamps, and snaps. I live in the hard-coal region, and if a cowboy will tell me about the West, I'll tell him about mining.

Louis Murray, of Pennsylvania.

Dear Sam: I'd like to have Pen Pals from the West, especially some cowboys, who would send me discarded things like cowboy hat, or broken gun or lariat, or a pair of chaps.

Martin de Bree, of New York.

Dear Sam: I'm a boy of sixteen and can ride and shoot. I would like to trade an all-American six-shot .32 revolver for a six-shot .22 revolver in good shape. I can also trade an American helmet for a Texas bowie knife. I'll swap even up. Whoever wants to trade, write quickly. I also want Pals from all over the West.

Wilbur Nelson, of South Dakota.

Dear Sam: I would like to have a cowboy Pen Pal. If he has any old things he doesn't want I'd like to have them, along with Western info.

Jack Wickes, of Pennsylvania.

Dear Sam: I'm a boy of thirteen and have always wanted to go out West. I would be very glad to receive a broken gun and old holster.

Gilbert Minnigh, of Maryland.

Dear Sam: I'm twelve years old, and I can ride, shoot, and rope. I'd like to hear from a cowpoke, from Arizona, New Mexico, or Texas, especially one who could send discarded things like busted guns, worn-out sombreros, or cartridge belts. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps, stamps, newspapers, and what-have-you.

Bob, from Illinois.

Dear Sam: I play cowboy every evening, and would be much pleased to get an old gun and holster. I'm very much interested in the West, and have always wanted to go there.

Claude Wearer, of Maryland.

Dear Sam: I'm a boy of eleven and sure like the West. I can ride horseback pretty well. I wonder if you'd get me Pals from Texas, Wyoming, Montana, or any other Western State. If you could get me old cowboy duds, I'd be especially glad.

Bob Moore, of Washington.

Dear Sam: I would like to have a Pen Pal from the West, especially one who is living on a ranch. I would like to swap things, like lassos, and chaps, and old pistols.

Joe Turecep, of Wisconsin.

Dear Sam: I would like some cowboy Pen Pals. I would be very happy, if some one would send me discarded things, such as old sombreros, torn chaps, busted guns, and so on.

Walter Zybach, of Nebraska.

Dear Sam: I'm ten years old and would like to have some cowboy friends. I'd be happy if some cow-punchers would send me a broken gun, and cartridge belt, and Stetson hat. I'm good at making cartoons.

A Dashko, of New Jersey.

Dear Sam: I am a boy of ten. I would like to have some real Western cowboy pals, who would send me an old cowboy outfit, and some snaps.

Junior Adams, of Kansas.

Dear Sam: I'm a boy of fifteen and am interested in the Texas Rangers, and Arizona cattle ranches. I would like to have some Pen Pals, especially from some who

have relics such as old chaps, guns, ropes, et cetera. Perhaps I have things they'd like in exchange.

EDWARD VANCE, OF KANSAS.

WESTERNERS WANTED

All these folks are lookin' for Western Pals fust an' foremost:

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of twenty-six and would like some Pen Pals from out West or any of the States. I like all kinds of sports, especially dancing. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

JUDY BLACKBURN, OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen and would like to have some Pen Pals, especially from Texas, where I'm moving soon.

MILDRED BLACKBURN, OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young girl of eighteen and would love to have some Pen Pals from the West and all over. I am fond of all outdoor sports, and I'm just crazy about dancing. JOAN LIS, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen, and I would like to roam the Western plains some day. So would you get me some Western Pen Pals and send me some Western songs? LEWIS LASLO, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of sixteen and love all outdoor sports, especially riding, hiking, fishing, and football. I would like to hear from any one who is interested in the West. Will exchange snaps and answer all letters.

FLATFOOT JAKE, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR MR. WILLS: I'm a girl of fourteen and long for a Pen Pal who lives on a ranch in Montana, Texas, California, or Arizona. I like to read, and go to the movies, and am fond of outdoor sports.

CLEAORAL STICKLER, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: Please find me a few Pen Pals. I am ten years old and like to ride, swim, and play baseball. Any girl would do, but I'd like to have one pal be from Wyoming. HELEN FURNARI, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am fifteen years old and would like Pen Pals from the Western States. I would like to hear from girls of fourteen to sixteen years. I like many sports, especially football. I'm captain of the basketball team at school.

WINIFRED KUBIAK, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen, and a high-school student. I like outdoor sports, and would love to have some Pen Pals from the West, and also some cowboy songs.

MARGIE VANNATTEA, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I'm seventeen years old, and live on a farm with my dad and two brothers. I would like to have a Pen Pal of my age who lives on a cattle ranch in one of the Western States. I've always wanted to be a cowboy, and I'd like to get in touch with one through you.

VERNER WHITEHEAD, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm eleven years old, and I would like to hear from some girls in Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico.

MAE RANDALL, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Please get me some Pen Pals. I am twelve years old, and will exchange snaps with any boy who writes me.

HARRY, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm eighteen years old and would like some Pen Pals from Texas, Montana, Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona, the Dakotas, and any other Western States. I intend to visit those States and my Pals in the future. I like to hunt, trap, and hike.

HOWARD MCALLEY, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am twelve years old and like the outdoors. I'm interested in the West and plan to go there some day. I'd like to have some Pals who could tell me about it. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

WALTER GOUGE, OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen and am interested in the West. Will you put me in touch with Pen Pals from Arizona, Nevada, and Montana? Will answer all letters. FRED C., OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I crave more Western Pen Pals. I can tell them all about big cities, for I've traveled everywhere. I'm a girl, seventeen years old.

SANDY, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to have some real cowboy Pen Pals. I'll answer all letters and tell them about hunting and fishing in my State. HARRY HILL, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I'm nineteen years old and aim to go West soon, and would like some

Pen Pals when I get there, especially from Colorado and Nevada. Will exchange snaps and answer all letters.

MAURICE HEBERT, OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fourteen and would like to have a few Western Pen Pals of my age. I like all sports, and promise to answer all letters.

IMOGENE GADDY, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I'm nineteen years old and would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the United States, especially in Arizona, Colorado, California, and New Mexico.

HARRY CARPENTER, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm thirteen years old. I want Pen Pals from Texas, Wisconsin, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and New Mexico.

B. HUGH HOGAN, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm sixteen years old. I would like some Pen Pals from the Western ranch States. I hope my Pal will know how to shoot and ride well.

WILLIAM WREN, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm twenty-one years old and live in a small town. I'd like to learn about the West, as I'm going out there very soon. I'm to be married in June, and we plan to hike out West.

DICK MERRITT, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eighteen and am quite lonely. Am going West in a year or so, and would like some Pen Pals from there. Have had some circus experience, if any one is interested.

WILSON BAUBLITZ, OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: We would like to hear from the Western girls and would also be glad to hear from all over the United States. Will answer all letters.

GERALDINE SKUNKLE, AND
MAE LINDEMAN, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen years and want Pen Pals from everywhere, but most of all from ranches in Texas, Wyoming, Arizona, and Nevada. And I'd like some cowboy songs.

CUTIE, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'd like to have some Pen Pals in Utah and Texas, and New Mexico. I'm a young man of twenty.

WILD KAT, OF OHIO.

OTHER REQUESTS

Jest a few more, folks:

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and want to hear from girls around my age from all over the world. I love dancing, swimming, and drawing. Will exchange snaps and answer all letters.

BONITA FOX, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am sixteen years old and would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world, especially some cowboys.

CLYDE NOWLIN, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm seventeen years old and would like Pen Pals from all over the United States and foreign countries. I love to write letters, ride, dance, swim, et cetera. I'll be glad to exchange snaps.

ROSE KERULIS, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen and would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the United States. I am a boy scout, and love to ride.

ROBERT JONES, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm fifteen years old, and am always out for a good time. I am fond of all outdoor sports. I want letters from all over the world.

MABEL, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fourteen. I like all sports. I'm anxious to have Pen Pals, so I hope they'll write.

JEANNETTE CHURCHILL, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR MR. WILLS: Just another girl of fifteen who would like to have oodles of Pen Pals. The first ten get snapshots. I'm forever laughing and joking and would like the same kind of friends.

BROWN-EYES, OF MISSOURI.

Deran Parsegian, of Oregon, would like some Pen Pals around twelve years old, an' some Western songs.

An' Dick Kettler, of California, would like tuh have some Pen Pals from out West an' any other place. He's twelve years ol' himself.

Waal, folks, no more for tuh-day. I reckon yuh've got plenty, at thet!

The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

CONGRATULATIONS, hombre!" we says ter Lum Yates at this week's meetin' o' the Wranglers Corner.

"What fer, Boss?" asks the slim Missouri puncher.

Him an' his pard, Zeke Olroyd, an' his little yaller dawg, Job, is settin' in their usual corner, an' our speakin' up suddenlike thet sort o' takes him by surprise. But we kin see thet he ain't quite so much in the dark about what we means, as he tries ter make out.

We grins. "Why, fer yore pitcher on the cover this week, Lum," we says. "Don't tell us yuh didn't know yuh was there—large as life an' twice as natural."

The rest o' the gang chuckles. They know thet Lum shore gits a kick out o' havin' his pitcher on the cover, an' thet he ain't likely ter fergit it.

"Shucks, Boss," says the slim waddy, "is my pitcher on the cover this week? I——"

"Help me, Hannah!" explodes Buck Foster. "If yuh ain't the most plumb bashful hombre I ever seen! Yuh know danged well yo're on the cover!"

"Yeah, Lum," says Billy West, "thet was a plumb fine pitcher. Yuh ought ter be proud of it. Most waddies would."

Lum's young face has got as red as a New Mexico sunset by this time. Everybody is lookin' at him an' grinnin'. We sees thet he is plumb flustered fer onct.

"Waal," he says at last, "I reckon it ain't sech a bad pitcher, at thet. I sho' didn't think thet artist hombre would ever git through paintin' it, though. He made me stay still so long I thought I was goin' to turn to stone."

We begins shufflin' through the mail about then. The first few let-

ters we finds have got pomes with 'em.

"How do yuh feel 'bout readin' us some pomes ter-night, Lum?" we asks. "We'll read the letters if yuh'll do the po'try."

"Danged good idea, Boss," says the Bar M waddy.

"I'll be a horned toad if yuh-all ain't locoed!" growls Buck Foster.

But nobody pays any attention ter the Circle J veteran—fact, everybody else seems ter be right in favor o' hearin' from the po'try-writin' hombres.

So we picks up the first one we comes ter an' gives it ter Lum. Here's what he reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS:
Inclosed yuh'll find a little pome
Thet shore is lookin' fer a home.
It's about yore book an' yore authors, too,
An' if yuh kin use it, it's all fer you.

WILD WEST WADDIES

The desert sun was shining down
On Desert Gulch, a small cow town.
Came Billy West, from old Montana,
By his side was Buck, sayin', "Help me, Hannah!"

Jest behind 'em came thet guy, Joe Scott,
And little Sing Lo, who was sweatin' a lot.
The big saloon was all quiet inside,
As if some pore hombre had up an' died.

The four saddle pards pushed open the door
An' saw a lot o' well-known faces fer shore.
Standin' by the bar, with his hand on his gun—
Yuh'd think the Shootin' Fool was after some one.

By his side were the Bar U twins,
On their faces a pair of grins.
The next one there is the Ranny Kid,
Not a-runnin' from the law, like he always did.

Young Jim Hazel is next in the line,
An' the forest ranger shore looks fine.
The new Red Wolf—well, he's there, too—
To fergit about him jest wouldn't do.

And Lum Yates is there, yuh kin bet on that,
Lookin' as fresh as a bran'-new hat.
Billy West says, "We got a word ter say—
We'll sing yuh a song an' be on our way.

"'Wild West Waddies' is the name o' the song,
An' don't yuh dare git the title wrong.

"We're Wild West waddies,
Here ter tell yuh now,
Thet we've been catchin' outlaws—
Mean ones—an' how!

"We ride across the prairies,
Down the steep hillside,
An' scatter them coyotes
Far an' wide.

"They write about us in a magazine,
So the world will know thet we ain't green.
Daring an' bold are the things we do—
If yuh want good stories, we're the ones fer you."

GEORGE BECK.
Cairo, Oklahoma.

Waal, the waddies all shore gits a kick out o' thet one. While they're laughin' an' talkin' about it, we goes through the sack an' picks out another one. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have never written to your magazine before, but I like it very much. There is nothing I can say against it. I have read it about three years, and think that it is the best on the market—mostly because love stories are left out.

Tell Buck Foster that he is a good fellow, although pretty hot-headed. He makes the stories interesting that way, though.

Here is a poem that I made up. In it I am trying to describe a real Western dance. Tell the waddies that they should go to one sometime. I think they'd enjoy it.

Here's the poem:

THE COWBOYS' BALL

The cowboys was gettin' tergether,
Comin' from city an' ranch—
A whole flock of jolly cowboys
From up by the Muskrat Branch.

The dance hall was a ranch house,
With one big barnlike room,
Which same was used for dancing—
The boys danced a jig with a broom.

The caller started callin'
  The words thet dancers need.
These are the words he told them,
  While they were goin' it full speed:

"Naow, hombres, git tergether,
  Jest break out an' stampede.
Select yore doleful pardners,
  Git them by the arm,
Shake them up like ginger,
  Until they're pretty warm.
Naow, my little ladies,
  An' yuh big ones, too,
Shake yore opposite pardners.
  Now all do-ce-do."

And so the jolly night wore on.
  At five they all went home—
So tired they could scarcely move
  And not wantin' fer ter roam.

LAURA HUMMEL.
Ettrick, Wisconsin.

Lum reads thet with a sort of a swing an' a rhythm thet almost has all the waddies beatin' time with their feet. The Bar M puncher shore does git whatever there is ter be got out of a pome like thet. He gets the *feel* of 'em, somehow.

Here is the next one we finds on the pile:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to the Wranglers Corner. Although my first one wasn't published, I don't think you meant any harm.

I have just read that story "Traitors' Mesa." Gee, but it sure was good!

Three W is my favorite magazine, and I often dream of my favorite waddies. They are Sonny Tabor, Bud Jones, and Kid Wolf. I like the Circle J pards, too, and sure get a kick out of Buck's and Joe's arguing.

Here's a line or two about the Circle J. I certainly hope no one gets mad about it.

THE CIRCLE J PARDS

The Circle J waddies are sure some boys,
But Buck and Joe make too much noise.
Next time they quarrel, Billy should do
  his best,
To try to put those two to rest.

Buck can't keep quiet, and neither can Joe,
Every few minutes they have to let go.
They need something in their danged thick
  heads—
If I was Billy, I'd fill 'em with lead.

Those two jaspers sure like to eat
Big brown biscuits and slashers of meat
That Sing Lo cooks as he sings away;
But the two couldn't cook in a year and
  a day.

They can maybe boil Java, but that is all,
Before they learn to cook, stone dead
  they'll fall.
They can fight and trail outlaws through
  the rains,
But little Sing Lo sure has the brains.

MRS. BUCK SMITH.
Brevard, North Carolina.

"It's a danged shore thing thet thet lady ain't never ate none o' the chink's cookin'," snorts Buck Foster when Lum finishes. "Help me, Hannah, I kin cook jest as good as he kin any day in the week."

"So be; Mistlee Floster, him allee same loco," mutters Sing Lo, his flat, round, yellow face havin' about as much expression as a poker chip.

"What?" yells Buck. "Why, yuh dang yaller heathen! Are yuh tellin' me——"

There's no sayin' what might 'a' happened then if Billy West hadn't got the veteran quieted down. But we goes on ter the next letter, which is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to you. I hope everything is *bueno* with you-all. I didn't see my first letter in print, but I guess there wasn't room for it.

I'm sending in a poem about the best all-around waddy on the 3W spread—Buck Foster. If you can find room, I'd like to see it in the Corner sometime. Here it is:

BUCK FOSTER

Listen, you hombres, and you shall hear
Of a broken-nosed waddy with a big split
  ear.
Wrapped around his hungry middle,
Reminding one of an ancient fiddle,
Is a shaggy, mangy bearskin vest,
Scarcely hiding his manly chest.
From all of this you know the rest:
It's Buck—of all waddies, he's by far the
  best.

KID FENTRESS.
Glenwood, North Carolina.

An' here's one more about Buck. We jest has time fer it afore we have ter adjourn the meetin' fer the week:

BUCK FOSTER

I am an hombre of the West;
An' I takes pride in me bearskin vest.
I kin ride any bronc thet's got a mane
So hard thet danged if it ain't a shame.

Oh, I rides anything thet's got hair—
Let 'em buck an' let 'em r'ar!
Oh, I kin fight an' I kin shoot,
An' I'm a good cowpoke, to boot.

MICHAEL WYZGA.
Trenton, New Jersey.

We're glad we ain't got ter ride home with Circle J after them last two pomes. Buck'll have plenty ter say. Mebbe we'll hear about it when the bunch comes ridin' back fer another meetin' next week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

Señor Red Mask In Verde Valley

Novelette

By GUY L. MAYNARD

Six-guns talk—fast an' ter the p'int—when the mysterious young caballero rides out ter spoil a killer's crooked game.

Spite Ranch

Novelette

By PHILIP F. DEERE

A young waddy ridin' the chuck line falls plumb inter a hull mess o' luck—some of it good, an' some thet calls fer plenty o' gun play.

John Law O' Gallows Gap

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

He's in a plumb tough jam, in spite of his badge—until he discovers thet lead an' smoke from Circle J is danged good medicine fer bad hombres.

Also stories of the Bar U twins, by Charles E. Barnes; Hungry and Rusty, by Samuel H. Nickels; the Shootin' Fool, by Houston Irvine—and other characters.

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Men and women who have accepted my offer are called "lucky" because they make so much money. But there's no luck about it. I show you how and furnish everything you need to start. *I don't want you to invest your money.* Sol Korenblit, New York, has made $110 a week taking care of the business I helped him establish. W. A. Marek, 21-year-old Connecticut boy, has often cleared over $100 a week. Mrs. Frank Young, Minnesota, is a widow with 2 children. She says, "I have made as high as $10 in two hours and up to $20 in one day." These are just a few. Others are doing as well or better. This shows the wonderful possibilities.

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I don't want your money. All I want is a chance to lay the facts before you so you can decide for yourself. If you want a sure, steady chance to make $15 a day—with an old, reliable, million-dollar manufacturing company—then mail the coupon and see how easy it is to start on my Home "Chain Store" System. You invest no money in stock of goods. Earnings start at once. Don't miss this chance. It doesn't cost a penny to investigate. You can't lose by mailing the coupon, so do it today—right away—before some neighbor gets in ahead of you!

ALBERT MILLS, President

202 Monmouth Avenue **Cincinnati, Ohio**

Albert Mills, President,
202 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

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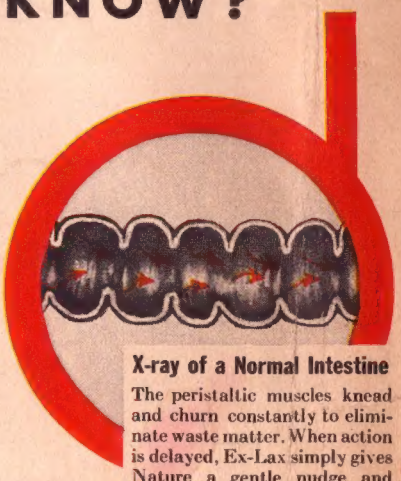
Don't gamble—get a box of Ex-Lax today!

Start *now* to use the right laxative, Ex-Lax. Get a box at your drug store. The trial size is only a dime. Or send the coupon for a free sample.



X-ray of a Normal Intestine

The peristaltic muscles knead and churn constantly to eliminate waste matter. When action is delayed, Ex-Lax simply gives Nature a gentle nudge and proper function is resumed.

Beware of Violent Cathartics!

Chronic constipation distends the intestines, causing loss of muscle "tone." Repeated abuse with violent cathartics may further impair the action of these muscles, thus often doing more harm than good.

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